

Suzie Drakes

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James Milne.

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She is the target, and the world might be the end game. Suzie Drakes is up against a wall.

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Drakes

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# 1 Codename Dragon

Suzie Drakes

She ducked her head as she stepped into the limousine behind her charge. Her eyes flicked backwards as she landed on the seat, before the door closed. She pulled her belt on as she reached over and did the same for the senator, who always tried to ignore her rules.

“What... Eugh. Get me out of here. Sick of all this.” The man shook his head, “Could do without your bullshit today, too.”

She failed to take the bait. Her eyes were focused on the mirror as they peeled away, and a truck that had just entered the road. Technically, they weren’t breaking any laws. This was as public a road as any, and there weren’t any significant weight restrictions on it. The truck’s container was clearly empty from the height of the tires.

“Next left.” She ordered the driver, and the senator sighed and rubbed his temples, “Why I have to deal with such a paranoid little \_”

She grabbed the back of his neck and shoved him flat as the back window exploded into fragments. It had been bullet resistant, but as that was a shotgun leaning on the mirror from the truck’s cabin, it didn’t really stand a huge amount of chance.

Unlike in games, shotguns really were an extremely good firearm, even at a reasonable distance. Didn’t help that the shooter wasn’t use buckshot, either. Deer shot. Didn’t need to be an armour piercing round to turn a window into shrapnel and her client into a screaming mess.

She sighed and undid her belt, her hand checking the weapon at her hip briefly, before she issued the next instructor to the driver, “Keep it steady, take it on the M1, towards the Monash. Call it in, get them to clear the left lane for us.”

Then she opened the door of the car, grasped the roof with a metallic whine and swung up onto the top of the moving vehicle. She saw the driver of the truck look at her as if she were crazy. The door slammed painlessly on her fingers, still grasping the roof, a moment before she launched herself forwards.

She landed lightly on the front of the grill, her feet braced against the bar, and one hand grasping the truck. A bullet whizzed overhead, and she made an irritated face. Any reasonable person would just stop the truck. Only a moron would start firing wildly with the chance of hitting passing cars, with exactly no chance of actually hitting the target.

They wouldn't stop the truck.

She did not look forward to the maintenance on this one. She punched through the front of the grill, and ruptured the radiator. She cringed as she pulled back, ripping the latex from her arm and scratching at the chrome lying underneath it.

She didn't bother to see whether the morons were going to overheat the engine before they realised what a brake was, and dropped underneath the front. She skidded briefly before her feet found some holds, and then she climbed down it slowly.

Her earpiece buzzed, and she rolled her eyes, "Yes? What? Sort of busy, here!"

"What the hell are you doing, Dragon?" A voice came back through. She could hear the whirr of a fan cutting in and out as he spoke. He was still in the office. So how would he...

"Aw, crap. We made the news." She winced, and reached the end of the truck. "Well, I need to stop this. So... I'll get back to you."

"Dragon!" Her boss snapped as she flipped herself upright easily onto the back. She swung lightly on the bars that kept the doors closed, and then dragged herself up onto the roof and began crawling forwards slowly.

The roof dented beneath her more shiny hand, as she pulled the metal taut. She paused and considered her options near the cab. Unlikely they knew where she was. Two in the cab, maybe more in the trailer, but not many.

She looked up and saw the distant news chopper looking to close in on one of the rarest things in Australian media. A police chase with a live shooter. It wasn't that weapons were that hard to come by, it was just that it wasn't something that was much of a problem.

“My poor gears.” She muttered to herself, before punching through the roof of the cab and into the head of the shooter. The shotgun clatter to the road and was lost. A hand tried to grab her wrist, and she rolled to the side as a tiny hole punctured in the rooftop. 9mm.

She ripped her hand free, demonstrating more strength than whoever was holding on probably expected. She heard a thunk as they hit the roof, right before she heard the brakes squeal, and the tires protest.

She went tumbling down the front of the cab, before grabbing onto the hole she’d made earlier. The truck’s trailer swerved wildly as it pulled to a halt. She heard a door kick open and dropped onto the ground easily.

She ducked around the corner, drawing the weapon from her holster, and failing to flinch as a bullet tore passed her head. She pulled her own trigger, and the man froze up before collapsing shaking to the ground as the taser did its work.

She shook her head slowly.

What moron tried to take on someone who jumped from a moving car?

“Target neutralised.” She spoke into her earpiece.

The ground shook, and she spun around to see smoke, staring in disbelief as she tried to find another explanation for the distance. One that didn’t involve her client having just been killed.

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“It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

She looked up at her boss tiredly, “Another agent might have been taken in. You’re right. But I’m not any agent, am I? I’m your show piece. And that’s all I am, so far as I can tell.”

The man walked around the desk and sat on the edge, crossing his arms as he looked down at her, “I’ve never thought of you as a show pony. I mean, what about that time last week, the gunman on the roof?”

“Right place, right time. Unlike today.” She replied stubbornly, glancing at the nearby door.

He nodded slowly, “And the time you save my life by pasting the guy who ran through the lobby doors?”

“Anybody can punch out a Leroy Jenkins.” She rolled her eyes, “And if it had been anybody else, they wouldn’t have had to wire his jaw shut, and you would have been able to speak to them the same day.”

He rolled his eyes, “Seriously? You’re good at this Sue. One of the best. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Suzie.” She corrected him, “O’Connor.”

He laughed softly, “John. You head home for the day. Got a brain check in the morning. Especially considering you jumped from a moving vehicle. But knowing you, you’ll just answer the way they want you to. One of these days, you should actually talk to someone.”

“I do.” She stood up, checking her holster, “Just not a shrink. Night John.”

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“What. The. Hell.” Suzie stared at her mother standing on the steps of their rundown apartment, talking to more than one news crew. Her mother had recognised her on the news, then, and called a bloody press conference.

Again.

She stuck two fingers in her mouth and blew an ear-piercing whistle. The cameras snapped around as she stepped across the road. The lights flashed in her eyes, and for a brief moment she forgot where she was, what she was doing. It never happened to her in the field.

But she wasn’t.

Suzie stepped over and crossed her arms, “Dickbags. Have you forgot the restraining order? None of you can be here. Not this close to my home. Not talking to my mum. Not filming me. Piss off.”



The cameras all aimed down, and she shook her head, “Tapes. Before you go.”

She took them as the reporters shyly moved away. She was sick of this rigmarole. Same damn thing, over and over. She crushed the plastic in her hand and walked passed her mother without speaking to her, tossing the tapes in the bin.

“Susan Ashley Drakes!” The woman screamed at her back, “Get back here! We are going to talk about this!”

The temptation to scream right back at her was there. If she was younger, she would have. She didn’t know when her mother was going to realise that she wasn’t a child anymore, and when she was going to realise that Suzie’s enemies weren’t just imagined. Not only imagined.

She walked up the stairs, ignoring the woman who made her life difficult. It would be so much easier if she didn’t try and take care of her. But for all the hate between them, she was still her mother.

Suzie entered her room, glancing at the window before kicking the door shut. She took another look before she reached up and pressed the sequence to release her arm from her shoulder. She cringed at the cold feeling as the nerves detached.

She dropped the rather expensive, and now rather ruined, prosthetic onto her workbench. Suzie sat in her chair and reached over to take a cloth, before scooting her chair over to a sink and wetting it before cleaning the grime around her shoulder, where she’d lost her arm.

Her fingertips traced the familiar patterns. Raised and scarred ridges around her early attempts at a locking mechanism. She’d only been a child when the accident had happened. She’d thought she was so clever when she’d put together her first prototype of the arm.

Didn’t help that everyone else had fawned over her as well. Except her mother. Always proud to the public, always spiteful to her. That had been the way of things since her father died, and she lived. Was never going to change.

She finished the routine, and peered out her window for a moment, before scooting back over and looking at her arm. She frowned and pulled a particular precision screwdriver from its place and undid one of the panels on the hand. She winced as she heard something move as she did.

Suzie put the screwdriver in her mouth and opened it slowly, and then sighed and turned it over, letting the broken gears rattle free onto the desk like a pile of dust. Pieces of rubber and other synthetics also crumbled with the metal.

She rolled her eyes, and began a complete disassembly. Pneumatic air muscles. That was the key to making the arm as mobile as it was, as precise as it was. And apparently she had burst some of the thousands that were in it, and she hadn't worked out a way to easily replace those, despite doing this every single month since she'd joined ASIO.

She really needed to get around to setting up a bulk account at McIntyre. Paying for all this on a government wage wasn't that easy, even if she got a serious bonus for the way they kept exposing her to near death.

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"What's up, girl?" Kim asked her as her face dipped. The two of them had been on a short shopping trip. Suzie had been picking up electronics and other parts, whilst her friend had been picking up new clothes and had tried very hard to get Suzie to try on a bikini. Failed, but tried.

Suzie shrugged. She didn't know how to explain that they were being followed. It was the third time she'd spotted them. Slightly taller than average, muscled, and overly confident. Blonde, and the face of a jerk. Someone used to getting what they wanted. However, they were restraining themselves, closing the distance slowly.

Kim elbowed her, "Hey, cheer up. Being invited down to a beach house for the weekend is not the worst thing in the world. If you really don't want to come, don't make yourself."

"You set all this up to try and hook me up with someone again, didn't you?" Suzie pretended to care where this conversation was going as they arrived at the bus stop, and their stalker attempted to disappear into the crowd, but kept close behind them.

There was the chance that this was just someone nervous who was looking to ask out Kim. That happened regularly enough as to be embarrassing. Kim always managed to handle it well, letting the guy down gently and making him think she was sweet whilst she kicked him in the heart. Suzie didn't know how she stood it.

"Well, sort of. But I promise you, it isn't like that. Not really." Kim said, trying to be vague. Suzie had heard those kind of promises before. She, however, knew better. She didn't get along with people easily, and she didn't get along with anybody looking to form a romantic attachment with herself.

Suzie sighed as a firm hand landed on her shoulder, "Second mistake. Now take it off, or I'll break it off."

The man leaned in, "Aw. What are you going to do, arrest me?"

Kim took a step backwards, and rubbed the bridge of her nose, knowing what was coming. Suzie reached over and grabbed the hand on her shoulder with her hand that wasn't real, and twisted sharply. The man screamed as his arm pulled straight a moment before it popped and his elbow dislocated. "Third mistake. If you want a fight kid, go find someone else."

She let go, and stepped back as the man took a wild attempt to punch her. She stepped around it easily before planting her knee firmly into his groin. He made a brief and pained look of betrayal before he collapsed to the ground.

"Oof." Kim winced, "Going to want to put some ice on that. You in a mood, Suzie?"

She nodded grimly, and tapped her earpiece twice, waiting as she got a notification that her own protection detail had noticed and would deal with it. She smiled at her best friend, only real friend, and hooked an arm through hers, "Lets go. They're sending a car."

She walked Kim away from the crowd, and the girl frowned, "You know, I think he was just going to try and hit on you."

"Mum was on the news. Again."

Kim winced, "Crap. What did you do this time? Dive tackle a suicide bomber?"

"Client got killed." Suzie winced, "But... I did jump from a moving car. Someone managed to distract me, and I'm not coping all that well with it, to be honest. I might hate the beach, but it'll be good for me."

A black car pulled up, and a door opened. Kim went to step in when Suzie caught her wrist, "That's not our ride."

The girl blinked, and a voice inside came, "It is, if you want it to be, actually. The university, right?"

Suzie leaned on the roof and ducked her head inside, looking at a kid her age in a grey suit. He smiled a winning smile at her, and Suzie's face fell. "Right. I think this classifies as stalking. Just because we share a class."

He laughed and shrugged, "Was on my way. Saw the fight and asked my driver to pull over. Nothing untoward."

"Try harder." Suzie replied and closed the door.

Kim grinned openly at her, "What was that?"

Suzie rolled her eyes, "No. No, we are not going there."

"Yeah, we are." Kim said pleadingly, "Come on! You know it has been forever since you and I have been able to gossip over a boy. What's his name?"

"That's our car." Suzie indicated as a vehicle pulled up with government plates on it. They walked away from the other and ducked inside. She sighed as they pulled away from the curb, "I did a group project with him, never even learned his name because he only showed up once. Dumped all the research on me, and left me to get it together to present. There's nothing here."

Kim pouted, and then Suzie leaned over and did up her belt, before re-checking her own. "Want to be dropped off anywhere? He was right, I was going to head by my lab, next."

"Nah, I'll stick around." Kim smiled at her.

Suzie shrugged. Her friend would get bored, and sit on a swivel chair and spin, whilst she tried to finish patching the broken arm she'd brought with her. Only having the two when she damaged them so frequently was beginning to be a drag. She needed to improve the amount of punishment the more delicate parts will take.

Kim flicked her cheek, “Already in your lab, aren’t you?”

“Sorry.” Suzie smiled sheepishly, “So, this beach trip. I assume you managed to wrangle yourself a boyfriend, and not just a pointless date for myself?”

Kim sighed, “Well... Maybe? That’s where I met the guy I want you to meet. He’s the younger brother. I don’t know if I’d call us boyfriend and girlfriend, yet. I’ve been trying to drop hints, but he’s been mostly ignoring them. Or blind. So the beach trip. His place, actually.”

“You found a guy who owns a beach house. Nicely done.” Suzie offered platitudes, and Kim rolled her eyes, “I’m not just interested in his wallet. He’s also hella cute, and a bit of an activist. Environment, war, that sort of thing. Which usually means he isn’t complete trash.”

Suzie considered her friend’s track record, and frowned, “No secret girlfriends on the side?”

Kim punched her lightly, and Suzie breathed in sharply as she realised how close she had come to grabbing and breaking the wrist before it landed. Her friend winced, “Oh. Sorry. Forgot that you’re wound up tight today. It always just feels like old times around you.”

Never felt that way for her.

O’Connor was taking her protection detail seriously. He often sent a team of two to shadow her on her time off, but the two cars following them suggested something more than that. Not that he would explain why, if she asked him.

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Suzie looked up from the workbench where her arm was disassembled and spread out in straight lines into the individual pieces, stretching. She looked over to where Kim was spinning, and frowned, “Can you give me a minute?”

Kim stood up sharply, yawning, and shrugged, “I’ll get us some drinks. Coffee?”

“Tea.” Suzie replied, and turned away as she headed out the door, looking at the man who had decided to try and sneak into her lab. “You came?”

John O’Connor stepped from the shadows, smiling at her, “After this morning, figured I didn’t have a huge amount of choice. He wasn’t a terrorist.”

“No, just some arrogant jerk thinking he’d hit on me.” Suzie winced, “Kim spotted it. After I overreacted.”

“Everyone goes through stuff after every mission.” John said sympathetically and walked over, looking down at her arm and picking up one of the damaged parts, “This one would have left a mark. You skipped your psych eval. Can’t do that, Suzie.”

“I didn’t. I rescheduled.” She corrected and took the gear back and placed it back into alignment. “Kim wanted to do some shopping. I thought seeing my friend was more important than listening to someone expound upon the dangers of my own capabilities.”

“It’d help if you actually listened, some time.” John shrugged, and then sighed, “Davian survived.”

She felt some relief at that. She’d only got a client badly injured then, and not outright killed. “Do we know who the threat is yet? Any claims of responsibility? Two attempts. One supposedly successful.”

“No.” John frowned with concern, “But I was meaning to ask you. Whoever did your debrief seems to not know to ask you the right questions. That sometimes you forget to volunteer information. Did you know the truck driver or his shooter?”

Suzie blinked, reviewing her memories, “Ah. Yes. Three sightings. I’ve seen the driver twice, both times in the CBD. Riding a bike, custom make, expensive model. Carbon fibre frame, twelve speed auto. A GS17. Not something a truckie could generally afford. Shooter spotted once near Parliament, two weeks ago. Reading a newspaper. Nothing particularly notable. He has a son that lives in the area.”

Her memory was one of the few things that helped her to stand out from a crowd. She wished it didn’t, sometimes. Every now and then she wondered what it would be like to be normal, to be like Kim. But she wasn’t, nor would she be.

"This is where I tell you we screwed up." John sighed.

Suzie winced, "Shit."

"Can you give us a sketch of both?"

She picked up a nearby notepad and put together a profile of both the men she had seen. Eyes, acne scars. Thinning hair. She chewed her pencil as she tried to translate her flawless memory to the paper, "What happened?"

"Three men in the trailer. Local cops forgot to open it until things had calmed down." John sighed heavily, "People died. Our targets are either on the run, or they've been killed as loose ends. Difficult to know which, at this point in time."

"Kim's back." Suzie waved at the door, "Do you mind?"

John waved the girl in, "I'll keep you in the loop, Suzie. For now, I'll put Jack on our missing men. You need to concentrate on you. I don't mandate the time off for nothing. And go to your next psych meeting."

"Yes, sir." Suzie nodded and then frowned, "Oh, and remind Jack to watch his manners. He's capable, but... Unpredictable at times."

John laughed, "That he is. See you."

Kim smiled coyly as the man left, "Well, he's hot, in a mysterious kind of way. And here I thought I'd found you the perfect guy."

"That's my boss."

Kim's smile evaporated and she winced, "So... That was..."

"Section Chief." Suzie nodded and turned back to examining her arm, "No chance that the two of us would ever go out. He's older than he looks, as well. Seven years between us."

"Seven years between my mum and dad." Kim teased, and shook her head, "He really has the sexy spy vibe."

Suzie paused and looked back up, she'd missed something. A shadow. "Kim. Did you bring someone else to the lab?"

The girl shuffled nervously, "Yes, but no, but don't be mad at me."

"Depends." Suzie glared.

Kim sighed, "So, the guy I'm trying to date... Turns out his little brother, the one I set up for you, goes here. Doing some PhD or other."

He and you have actually... Eh... Met. I didn't realise earlier. His name is Ted, actually."

She turned around slowly and tapped her foot slowly, "Ted. And why would I be interested in a Ted?"

Kim winced and walked over, opening the door and the boy from the car walked in. Messy hair, his tie already loosened, and a bodyguard waiting for him in the hallway. He smiled nervously at her, "You could have just come with me. I wouldn't have done anything."

Suzie shook her head, "Yeah. Never going to happen. Don't know if this weekend is going to be that comfortable, Kim."

"Hold up!" Ted raised his hands, "She didn't know. Never met me. I like to keep it that way, keep out of the spotlight."

Suzie reviewed him slowly, and frowned, "One of the two vehicles that followed us here was for you. So what classifies a second student at this university for an ASIO-backed security detail?"

"My older brother." Ted shrugged, and nodded at her arm, "Do you mind?"

"Yes." Suzie replied, "Who is your older brother?"

"Stephen McIntyre." Kim said quickly, breathlessly.

Suzie burst into a grin and turned to her, "You are dating the head of McIntyre Industries, and you didn't tell me? What the hell, girl."

Kim shrugged sheepishly, "He's nice. Cute. And probably doesn't have the time to cheat on me, like my past boyfriends. It was an accident, Suzie. I really didn't mean to get hooked up with your idol or anything."

"My brother should be no one's idol." Ted ignored her earlier advice and peered over her arm, "Older models, mostly. Unique way of balancing things. How... Oh. These are for nerve conduction. Or a replacement for it."

Suzie stepped lightly on top of his foot, and then pressed down not lightly. "I don't like being ignored. I do like your brother's designs. Modelled this off a demonstrator at the Inventor's Fair."

"They're not his." Ted said with a wince, "That really hurts. But most of his designs are mine. I like being an unknown. He likes the crowds."



Suzie sighed and stepped off him, “You should go. Don’t want all your charm to wear off before the weekend.”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.” Ted nodded slowly and shrugged. He turned away and walked from the building, and Suzie couldn’t help but admire the way he held himself. Rejected, and attempting not to limp, he still seemed confident. Not in an arrogant way that ignored her opinion, just one that hadn’t given up just yet.

Kim glared at her, “What the hell, Suzie? It’s clear that you like him.”

“Is it?” She turned back to her arm and picked up one of the controllers, plugging it in to her laptop and checking which version of the firmware she’d last pushed to it. Running a couple versions behind. She updated it to the latest.

Kim leaned on her shoulders, “Hell yes. If it was anyone else, Suzie, I could swear you’d just yanked down his pants. You’re too subtle. I don’t think he noticed.”

“He did.” Suzie smiled slowly, “Fine. You did okay, Kim. I like him. But a double-date with his brother over the weekend? Aren’t you going to be a little... Out-geeked?”

“I don’t plan to let Stephen do much talking this weekend.” Kim replied slowly, “You sure you’ll be okay with him? Not going to push him away too hard?”

“They’re only worth it if they fight.” Suzie replied and winced, “Besides. I’m damaged goods, Kim. Someone has to know what they’re getting in for with me. Damaged and dangerous.”

Her friend sighed, “At least you won’t be around your mum.”

“There is that.” Suzie agreed.

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“How are you feeling?” The psychologist asked, placing their pen aside deliberately.

Suzie shrugged, "Saw Kim yesterday. That's why I rescheduled. Our routines don't generally allow for it."

"This would be... Kimberly Nolan." The psych checked their notes, "You've mentioned her before, a childhood friend. From before the accident. The two of you must be very close to go through all that together."

Suzie shrugged non-committal.

The woman shook her head with frustration, "I am trying to make an assessment as to whether or not you are safe to return to the field, Susan. You were in a shooting. Having all the right answers doesn't tell me whether or not you're in the right frame of mind for this. That you're coping."

"My name is Suzie. Not Susan." She corrected the woman, "And being intentionally antagonistic isn't likely to make me open up. I do have a temper, but I'm hardly thoughtless."

"Then tell me about your friend." The psych shrugged, "Why did you become friends?"

Suzie shrugged, "We were kids. Why does anyone become friends at that age? One of us decided it was going to be that way, and so it was."

"Which one of you?"

Suzie rolled her eyes, "Get a feeling most people wouldn't be able to answer that. If you're just looking for me to show off my memory I'll happily spend the next hour telling you the decimal places of Pi."

"Since you came in and sat down, how many times have you checked the windows and doors?" The psych replied.

Suzie shrugged, "Enough. More of a habit than anything else."

"A coping mechanism." The psych nodded.

Suzie rolled her eyes, "That's in my file, too. Long term PTSD following an accident as a child. I lost my father, my brother, and my arm. That I have a few tics is to be expected."

"You didn't just lose your arm. You shattered your spine. A child had to be taught how to walk again." The psych tried to say soothingly, "And now you jump from moving cars. Your physical recovery is nothing short of awe inspiring. I am concerned about your mental health."

Suzie shrugged, "Same as it has ever been. I am not a danger to myself. I suppose I am a mild danger to others. I overreacted the other day."

"Tell me why you think you overreacted."

— — —

John O'Connor

"So Suzie didn't overreact."

Jack shook his head, "No, sir. Not in the least. And she's aware of it, as well. She dumped the tracking device that he tried to plant on her."

John sighed heavily and shook his head, "So... The question remains... Why didn't she tell me?"

"She doesn't do that, sir." Jack shook his head, "Right now, all she knows is someone stalked her, and then tried to plant a device on her. She has others interested in her. Corporate interests. Her prostheses might be outclassed by McIntyre, but it'd be easier to steal her designs than Stephen McIntyre's. She isn't certain, so she won't volunteer the information."

John smiled, "She's too young, Jack. For all of this. But... Can't do without her. Never thought I'd say that. We still have the kid in custody? Know any more than Suzie might?"

"Davian employed them. Through a series of intermediaries, shell corporations. Our senator has quite the number of links to organised crime. But we already knew that." Jack shrugged, "He wants her back. Doesn't feel safe without our Suzie. Which either means he doesn't know the bodyguard who has been with him for the last six months..."

John nodded, "You're right. Davian requested her, and we felt comfortable that the threat was low enough to deploy our celebrity. We honestly believed that he was setting himself up for a fall, considering her memory. And it has been useful to build out a list of his less savoury contacts."

"I can't be sure, early days, but I don't think it was one of them that tried to eliminate the senator." Jack shrugged, "Things aren't adding up, yet. Too many things in the pipeline that would benefit the wrong kinds of people."

John shrugged and leaned back, "So. What do I do about Suzie, then? She might be personally involved in the case. But she's as likely to put it together in a day as we are in a week."

"She's on mandatory leave." Jack shrugged, "For now, that's where she should stay. I'm sure you can come up for a reason she should stay there, until I have something more concrete for you, at least."

"Don't take too long, Jack. I need to know if someone is targeting one of our own." O'Connor warned him.

The agent nodded and stood up, "Sir."

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O'Connor picked up the phone, glancing at the caller ID, before cracking open a rather extensive file, "How can I help you, Josiah?"

"Just a courtesy call, O'Connor. I made contact with someone today on your payroll. Thought I'd report it, even though I expect she might already have. You're aware of my weekend plans. Seems Suzie Drakes has become a part of those plans."

He frowned slowly, "Aha. I don't need to warn you that she's a powder keg, do I? There is a very long list of things you need to not do or say around her."

"I'm aware, O'Connor."

He didn't really have an excuse to tell Josiah to change his plans, or to order Suzie to change hers. However, he had to confess he wasn't particularly comfortable putting the both of them in the same room. It was entirely possible that multiple missions could fall apart, or suddenly succeed. Toss of coin which happened.

"Enjoy your weekend, sir."

The phone produced a dial tone and he hung it up slowly, before turning another page in Josiah's file.

If you only ever made deals with nice people, nothing would ever get done. However, having a man like Josiah working with them filled him with vast amounts of stress and anxiety. Having a man like that getting their hooks into Suzie... Was another magnitude of worse.



## 2 Operation Beachhouse

Kim Nolan

She picked up her phone as she stared at the screen, “Hmm?”

“Kim? I catch you at a bad time?”

She flicked through a couple of fonts, “Just working. I saw Suzie today, and she seemed out of things, so I’m running a bit behind. Might have to do some this weekend, too. Sorry. Campaign is coming up to deadline.”

“Yeah. We do what we have to.” He replied understandingly, “Though, if I was a less understanding man...”

Kim rolled her eyes, “Hey, don’t get the wrong idea. Just because I invited your little brother and my friend along doesn’t mean you get to escape my attention.”

“I have been pretty bad lately. Promise I have a good reason.” He said nervously, “I... Can’t talk about. NDAs. But I promise I am not taking you for granted. Besides, if I can lie in the sea breeze with you propping your feet up on me as you work... I’ll take that.”

Kim laughed softly and shook her head, “Yeah, this whole thing you have going. The no expectations? That’s not going to fly for me. I have expectations. A lot of expectations. That’s why I’m dragging you out of the city, so people can stop distracting you. I can’t believe I have to say it.”

“I’m not entirely stupid, Kim.”

She grinned and glanced over at her packed bag, and thought about exactly what she was planning. “Good. So, you just call to hear my sweet voice?”

“Actually, no.” Stephen replied, “Called to apologise. Heard that Ted and Suzie met, and it didn’t go that well. Something about a fight?”

Kim laughed, “They’re fine. Actually, it went better than I expected. Suzie sort of likes him, even if he is an arrogant prick. She likes it when people try, and she’s got some victim mindset that makes her think she’ll hurt everyone. So she makes them try harder. And he obliged.”

Stephen breathed a sigh of relief, “So it won’t be completely awkward when we sneak out and leave them on their own.”

“Suzie knows that’s the plan.” Kim laughed happily, excited that he finally seemed to be getting the point of the weekend. “Though, any ideas on how to not Ted down a few pegs?”

“Huh. Well, a brother always knows how to hurt another. Can’t say it has ever made him even a little bit more reasonable. My brother walks into a room and knows he’s the smartest one in it. Always been that way.” Stephen said with exhaustion.

Kim frowned, “Oh. Well. I wonder if that’s still true. We stick him in a room with Suzie... I wonder which one of them is going to work out that the answer isn’t clear anymore.”

“You’re pretty confident to be saying that.” Stephen laughed, “I know Suzie has been in the news a few times, and she’s above average, but I’ve never seen anything to suggest she’s a genius. Not that I’m trying to pick a fight about your friend.”

Kim nodded slowly and switched out of her graphic design program and fired off an email, “I just sent you a video. Don’t pass it around.”

“Aw, is that you as a kid?”

Kim laughed, “Oi, Romeo. Pay attention to the other girl. That’s Suzie. At six years old.”

Stephen went quiet, and Kim flicked back, tidying up the colours and making sure that they would fit within the range for the printer. She didn’t particularly like the palette, it was pretty bland, but it was the customer’s brand.

She heard him suddenly suck in air, “So, what do you think of the Dragon Fist?”

“Are you telling me that a six year old girl made a device that could literally punch through trees?” Stephen asked, “The fabrication alone...”

Kim shrugged, repositioning the phone as she kept working, “Wasn’t the first time, or the last. Only time we filmed it though. Because after their parents found this... Well, Suzie wasn’t just grounded for a month. Couldn’t sit down much either.”



"That's horrible." Stephen said, "Wait, their parents? Is this other kid, her brother?"

"Yeah." Kim said sadly, "Aaron. Don't... Don't bring him up, even in passing. Not around Suzie. She's not over it."

"He died?"

Kim took a deep breath, "Yeah. Try not to let this sink through the sieve you call a memory. Suzie's accident, she lost Aaron and her dad. She... You forget things easily. Nice and easy to distract. Suzie remembers everything. Always. And that includes watching both her brother and father bleed out, whilst she was paralysed in the ruins of a car."

"Aw, hell." Stephen sighed, "Yeah. I'll steer clear of talking families around your friend. Sounds complicated."

Kim nodded, "Yep. Only family she has left is her mum. Loves and hates her. Though, as a bit of a distraction for the both of us, I had a bit of a crush on Aaron when we were young. Running around in the forest as Suzie made toys for the all of us."

"Are you trying to make me jealous, Kim?"

She shrugged, "Sort of. Did it work?"

"No." He said hesitantly, "But if you want me to express my attention, I could maybe swing by."

She laughed, "Down boy. Working. But it would be nice if you were more spontaneous like that, after the weekend. Doing my best to make sure we'll have the time. Sorry."

"Sure, wait... What!? What the hell..."

Kim sighed, "Are you working, too?"

"Just checking in on some things. Uhm... How mad is your friend going to be if she gets a present from my brother?"

Kim snapped to attention, "Well, that sounds particularly creepy. Please tell me it isn't."

"No, it's super creepy. He's never even paid a girl attention before." Stephen said, "Uh... I don't have the exact orders here, but he sent an order worth half a million to one Susan Ashley Drakes."

“Oh... Your brother is so creepy!” Kim exclaimed. “I... I have to call Suzie. Sorry.”

“I need to go find something to beat my brother to death with.” Stephen said, obviously still in shock, “We’ll talk later. About whether or not he’ll be in the hospital and unable to come with us tomorrow.”

“... Yeah.” Kim agreed.

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“Yes? What?”

Kim laughed nervously, “I catch you at a bad time, Suzie?”

“Always.” Her friend replied, “I can’t hold the phone and my screwdriver, and my arm. What’s so important that you actually called me?”

“Put me on speakerphone.” Kim solved part of the problem, “Uhm... So Ted was kind of nice today...”

“Spit it out, Kim. I’m tired.”

Kim twirled her hair, “He did something creepy. Like really, really, really creepy. Stephen just noticed that he sent you an order of some kind from the company worth buckets.”

“Yeah, I got it.” Suzie replied, relaxing, “Not that creepy. I mean, it was a little bit surprising, but it wasn’t like he arrived with it to declare his love. He sent me a sampler of new materials. Which I am currently fitting into my arm.”

“Sampler...” Kim said slowly, “Suzie... That order was worth half a million. As in, neither of us could ever pay it back.”

“Huh.” Suzie sounded uninterested, “I think he was trying to impress me, but I don’t care about the value. Mostly I was interested in the new polymer synthetic. I really hated the latex covering I was using. This is closer to skin, still not there, but way better. Still probably surprising if I shake someone’s hand, though.”

Kim breathed a sigh of relief, “So... How awkward are you going to be around him this weekend? We need to uninvite him?”

“It’s fine, Kim. He’s no worse than a guy who buys you a dress on the first date. He’s just noticed one of my interests. I’ll knock him down a peg or two soon enough.” Suzie stated, “You can go back to talking with your boyfriend, now.”

“Oh. Okay... I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Suzie spoke as if she had something in her mouth, “Aha.”

Kim hung up and texted Stephen, not sure if she really knew how to explain that the weirdness of his younger brother’s flirt had actually worked. Then again, Suzie wasn’t a normal girl. She’d given up fitting in a long time ago.

Kim turned back to her work, and glared at the frustrating poster and the way it felt off balance because of the horrible logo she couldn’t work out how to fit into any half decent design.

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She snorted and jerked awake, sitting up and groaning. She reached up tiredly and peeled a piece of paper from her cheek, before feeling around for her buzzing phone.

She put it to her head slowly, “Kim Nolan.”

“Hello, Kimberly.”

She rubbed at her forehead tiredly, “Uh... Who is this?”

“If you cooperate, you will live. If not, you will die. And Susan will die.”

Kim felt her stomach drop, “Oh, shit. Shit. What do you want?”

“Go outside. A vehicle will pull up, and you will enter it.” The voice stated without emotion, and then hung up the phone.

Kim slipped her phone into her pocket and stood up slowly, frightened. A firm hand landed on her shoulder and she nearly wet herself in terror. She looked over, and breathed a sigh of relief, “Were you messing with me, Suzie? That wasn’t funny.”

"No. And it wasn't. Sit." Her friend instructed and stretched, "You were late so I let myself in. Didn't want to wake you. But, I might be late now. Someone will be by to check in on you in a bit."

Suzie headed out the door, and Kim looked around, spotting the cocoon her friend had made for herself. An empty pizza box and can crushed into a ball lay beside a laptop playing a TV show. She paused the show and scratched at her neck. Exactly how long had Suzie been here?

She heard a screech outside, and then cursing and a vehicle pulling away rapidly.

Kim swallowed nervously, and then her phone rang. She didn't want to answer it, not after the last call. She looked at the unfamiliar number, and wrote it down. At least it wasn't unlisted, "Kim Nolan."

"We met yesterday. I'm Suzie's boss, John. She told me to call you, that something had happened." His voice was filled with concern, and understanding. She breathed a massive sigh of relief and sat down on her bed.

"Yeah. I... I think I just had someone try and kidnap me. Threatening to kill me or Suzie if I didn't get in a van. Suzie got in the van."

"The Dragon's fine." John reassured her, "Suzie has her way of dealing with things, even if she is technically on mandatory leave right now. Heard you had plans for the weekend?"

"Uh... Yeah. I overslept." Kim said, still dazed.

John seemed to reach a decision, "Then that's for the best. The McIntyre beach house is easy to defend, and fairly secluded. We'll send a car to escort you once Suzie finishes up, don't get in it if she isn't. We'll sort this out. Anyone else I need to call to give a heads up?"

"S... Stephen." Kim said nervously.

John seemed unsurprised, "He'll be notified shortly. But, the McIntyre's already have both private security and one of ours watching them, so I wouldn't worry about a repeat performance."

She took a deep breath, and sighed, "I'm sorry. I should tell you about the voice, right?"

“No need. Call was recent enough we were able to lift a copy from the telecom. Don’t worry, you did fine. We’ll get to the bottom of this soon enough. Right now, just focus on yourself and feeling okay.” John stated sympathetically.

“That was fast.” Was all that Kim could come up with.

John laughed, “Yeah, well, we might have already been watching for something like this. Not that I’d got around to telling Suzie yet. Wanted her to enjoy her time off. Make sure that boyfriend of yours knows to pamper you after a shock like this.”

Kim was spinning, “Uh... Yeah.”

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“Asshole.” Suzie muttered, rolling her wrist.

Kim looked nervously at her friend, “So... You’re just... Fine with this.”

“Nope. Not at all. Someone threatened my friend and I don’t get to be the one to do anything about it. Couldn’t even question anyone before O’Connor had the van full of morons carted off.” Suzie said with irritation.

Kim glared, “You and I have very different approaches to not being fine.”

“Cookie?”

Kim stared in shock at the biscuit, and then took it slowly, “So, you’ve been cooking again. Are you intending to flirt back with the half million dollar bribe?”

Suzie rolled her eyes, and held up her prosthetic arm, “He helped me make it a little better. I don’t feel any debt. He’s the moron if he expects a government employee to pay it back. And a bigger one if he expects it to do much to me personally.”

Kim touched the arm gently, “Well, it doesn’t have the weird feeling of silicone, or grossness of latex. Still odd, though. And that makes it crazy expensive?”

“It’s fireproof, and should be fairly tear proof.” Suzie shrugged, “I’m less likely to damage it. Which should be nice. I think most of the cost was in the new metals though. Managed to reinforce the hand.”

Kim nodded slowly, “We live in completely different worlds, you know that Suzie?”

Her friend laughed and settled into the seat with a yawn, barely glancing at the mirror. “Oh, before I forget, your boss called whilst you were out cold. Apparently you can forget about the deadline, the client missed their payment and is refusing to play nice.”

“Yay.” Kim said sarcastically, and looked out the window at the highway drifting by, “Six months work for nothing. Again. At least I’m on salary now. Jerks.”

Suzie poked her in the side, “So your first thought isn’t just what you’re going to get up to with your boyfriend?”

“Cool it, Suzie.” She sighed, “Yes, I’d like that. But... We’ve only been on two dates. And haven’t even held hands. This isn’t another Kim romance. I want it to be... But...”

“He’s the CFO of one the largest military development companies in the world.” Suzie shrugged, “He doesn’t have a whole heap of time.”

“Walking encyclopedia.” Kim rolled her eyes, “Since when did you know who the CFO of McIntyre is?”

“Since I got concerned after you mentioned that you thought Ted was being creepy. Which I suppose means I’m creepy. Everyone who comes in contact with me goes through a background check.” Suzie sighed heavily, “Technically, Ted isn’t employed by McIntyre Industries. He’s an independent contractor. Which is sort of weird for a family owned business. Their dad is CEO, Stephen is CFO, their cousin is head of R&D. But he’s out.”

Kim nodded slowly, “Black sheep, I guess. You could just ask him. But then you’d have to explain all this and not be creepy about it.”

"I made the cookies for everyone." Suzie shrugged, leaping over the conversation, "Plus... I didn't want to be at home this morning. She threw stuff at me."

Kim winced and reached over, squeezing her friend's hand. Suzie shrugged as if it were simply her lot in life. "Was going to ask the dumb question... I never gave you a key to my new place. How'd you break in?"

"It took me about ten seconds with a basic five dollar lockpick set." Suzie shook her head, "Hopefully the McIntyre's security is a bit more of a deterrent."

Kim winced, "Someone actually tried to kidnap me."

"I was the ransom." Suzie sighed, "I'd try not to think about it too much, Kim. You just have the luck to have some shitty friends."

Kim glared at her, "Oh, hell no. You are not going to be depressed all weekend, on a beach, at a rich guy's house. If you do that to me, there's no way I won't feel too guilty to get laid."

Suzie laughed.

— — —

Suzie Drakes

O'Connor had probably been right that there was nothing more that she could do, and that the beach house would be safe. Sitting under the protection of the McIntyres wasn't comfortable, but it made sense. Behaving logically was important at this point in an investigation.

Someone had painted a target on Suzie's back, and endangered her friends. She should consider herself lucky that Kim had found herself with a boyfriend that required round the clock security. Not that Suzie hadn't already spotted holes in it.

She yawned as she stepped from the car, and stood in front of the mix of wood and glass. She checked, and then reached back in and picked her bag up off the floor of the car and swung it over her shoulder.

“Stephen!” Kim squealed and ran in the direction of the building. Suzie stopped her as the two figures stepped onto the patio, and Kim glared, “Hey. You’re not supposed to be getting in the way just yet.”

“That’s not Ted. Or a guard.”

Stephen waved at them casually, and winced at her suspicious glare, “Ah, I may have told Ted to go crawl back in a hole. But I found you someone else you might get along with. Susan Drakes, meet Josiah McIntyre. My cousin.”

Suzie let go of her friend, trying to tell herself to cool it. Of course he had. “It’s Suzie.”

Josiah stepped up, and held out a hand, “Take your bag?”

“Nope.” Suzie replied, “Show me the house, though. You’re the R&D one, right?”

He sighed, clearly not happy to be there, “And you’re the celebrity bodyguard. How wonderful. We know each other.”

She ignored him, and glanced at her host, “You need the spotter on that roof to move over. He’s left a gap all the way from the highway to hear, where someone can go unnoticed.”

Stephen nodded slowly, “Sure thing. But, you’re not supposed to be working right now, right? Kim, please tell me she’s not going to shadow you.”

“She’s not.” Kim glared at her.

Suzie shrugged, “Force of habit. This morning’s incident is mostly dealt with. Hardly call them professionals. But if you don’t treat Kim like a princess, after all this, you don’t deserve her.”

“Come on in.” Stephen waved them indoors, “Your friend has nothing to worry about, Suzie. We’re secure here, with movies, popcorn, and a private beach. And I left my phone at work. By accident.”

Kim grinned excitedly, and Josiah nodded his head, “This way to your room.”

She followed the grumpy man slowly, watching the way he walked. She didn’t like the house much. Too many doors, too many windows. Even the furniture couldn’t help conceal you much if that was the intent.



"You don't have to be that paranoid." Josiah noticed, "Your boss asked me to re-task one of our satellites over the area, and has a livefeed. And I assume whoever is watching won't simply want to watch you sunbathe."

"I don't do that." Suzie stated and stepped into the room set aside for her, dropping her bag at the end of the bed and turned to face him.

The jerk looked at her in confusion, "I suppose you're cute enough already."

"I suppose you're an idiot. I have a prosthetic arm. Palette matching. I can't exactly tan without it standing out more than it already does." Suzie stated.

Josiah nodded slowly, "I suppose. You'd be surprised how many people want it to. Plenty of the people who come through my department ask for the chrome look."

"It's exciting to be a cyborg when you're young and dumb." Suzie shrugged, and sat down on the bed, feeling the softness, "So how'd Stephen blackmail you into coming?"

"He didn't. I volunteered."

Suzie stared, taken off guard, "You... Volunteered... To be the blind date of a girl you already seem to hate?"

"I don't hate you." Josiah replied, equally surprised, "I just... Don't know yet."

Suzie rolled her eyes and opened her bag, pulling out a plastic container of biscuits. "Starting over. Hi, I'm Suzie Drakes. I made cookies. Want one?"

"Sure." He laughed, and took one from the box before glancing over, "Think those two are finished?"

"Give 'em a minute. They've never kissed, but she's never been kidnapped before. Well, ever. But someone tried." Suzie shrugged. "What about you?"

"Kidnapped? No." Josiah shook his head, "Most the security is just for insurance purposes. Someone took a shot at Stephen's dad once. But few people are interested in directly attacking the creator of their weapons. Even the nuts recognise it is an unhealthy place to stand."

"That's half the question, I guess. What about a kiss?" Suzie teased him.

He shifted uncomfortably, and she rolled her eyes, "So you can talk to me about prostheses, weapon design, but not emotions? What kind of basement is your lab in?"

"I've never had a girlfriend. Part of why I'm being set up by my cousin. And you can't call this set up particularly comfortable." He shrugged, "There's... Expectations."

Suzie nodded, "Yeah. We're going to mess around for a weekend, and then probably never talk to each other again. And it's going to be awkward right up until the end. Those are my expectations. This is going to be a disaster. But... Kim deserves a break."

"But the biscuits are nice. You can actually cook."

Suzie stood up, and began moving out to the lounge with the box, "Why do you sound so surprised by that?"

"Well... You're not exactly a girly girl."

She turned and crushed his foot with hers, and glared at him, "Want to try that again?"

"Well... I don't see you being a... Housewife. Damn that hurts." Josiah smiled sheepishly.

She rolled her eyes and released him to hop as she put the biscuits down and noted the shift in the carpet on the stairs indicating that the two had retreated to a single bedroom. Seemed that Kim was getting what she wanted, then.

"I think you're the kind of idiot that insults when he means to compliment, and insults worse when he means it." She said as she placed the biscuits out.

Suzie walked over and glanced outside and shrugged, "I'm going to go get changed. Try not to insult me again when I get back."

"Were you checking for snipers?"

She punched him in the gut as she passed, keeling him over.

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She emerged from the room in a light and yellow sundress, with her laptop tucked under her arm. Suzie stepped into the lounge and found the least sunny spot to sit in, falling into a comfortable chair and putting her feet up on the ottoman.

“You actually look nice in that.”

She tossed a cushion from the couch with precision and force. Josiah held up his hands, “Hey! What I did do this time?”

“Why are you surprised I can pull off a dress?” Suzie glared at him, and then sighed, and patted the armrest, “Now get over here.”

“You going to hurt me?”

She rolled her eyes, “No, I was going to show you some code. Actually. As a sort of thank you for last night.”

He walked over and leaned on the chair, “A thank you? What did I do last night?”

“The order.” She replied and held up her arm, “The skin is almost half decent. Thanks.”

“Ted sent you that.”

Suzie glared at him, “Oh, you don’t want to play stupid with me. Ted is a contractor. Which means that for an order of that price, it had to be approved by the department head. Everything I got is experimental, meaning R&D. You’re the head of R&D, and volunteered to meet me. I don’t mind you being a manipulative dick, but own it when I work it out.”

Josiah shrugged, “Okay. So why the code?”

“You’re not trying to recruit me?”

He shook his head, “No, I’m not. I am interested in your coding, but we could just talk about it instead. I... Saw a chance to meet the real Suzie Drakes. You’re famous in some circles. But I was interested in meeting you. I doubt my work is as exciting as yours, adrenaline junkie.”

She punched his leg lightly and put aside the laptop, “Fine. I accept your terrible lie. You were totally giving me an interview. Suppose by upgrading my arm I passed, then?”

Josiah shrugged, “Maybe. Do you think... We need to leave? They’ve been up there a while...”

"Kim is currently balling her eyes out. She was shaken up by this morning." Suzie shook her head, "She might try and pass it off as they were romantic, but... She's just not coping. Can't blame her."

Josiah sank into the couch nearby, "Should I find a movie? What kind do you like?"

"Not the kind you do." Suzie shrugged, and looked him up and down again, "For a complete sociopath, you don't exactly look like a cannibal or anything nuts."

He glanced at her, "Wow. What did I do to fall so far in your eyes?"

"Whilst I was changing I took a look at your file. Bad idea." She shook her head, "Project Atlas."

He sighed heavily, "That was all theoretical, and like you can talk. How many weapon designs did you come up with when you were a kid?"

"Fair." She smiled at him, and he blinked slowly and sighed, "You were teasing me."

"Yep. Because I invited you to my chair, and you chose the couch." Suzie shook her head, "I told you my expectations, remember? I don't remember awkwardly pretending to be friends on the list."

"You weren't... You want..."

Suzie shrugged, "You're cute. I'm bored. I don't want to think about what Kim is going through right now. So either we can make out, or we're going to watch a hugely depressing film whilst I hug a pillow and cry."

Josiah stared at her, not understanding that she was being honest. "This... Sounds like a trap."

She skipped to her feet and walked over to him, sitting across his lap. "Do I need to spell it out to you? I like you. You put in the effort to flirt with me. Accepted that I'm a paranoid lunatic. Even tried to compliment me in your own insufferable way."

He swallowed nervously, and she grinned at him and leaned in.

She sighed with relief as the window made a thunking noise, and flipped the couch, putting them both on the ground as she held him down. "About bloody time. I can't believe they almost let me kiss you before taking the shot. I was so obviously distracted already."

“What the hell is going on?” He growled from the ground.

Suzie shrugged as she heard another thunk and the bullet-proof window wobbling. “Like you said before. Snipers. Singular, actually. Whoever targeted Kim this morning has decided to make their move. Sorry about... Leading you on. I wanted them to think you had my complete attention.”

Josiah sighed, “If you’re the one being shot at, why am I the one on the ground?”

“Which one of us is the trained one?” Suzie retorted.

He shrugged, “Fair enough. And the talk?”

“Found a bug in my room. Several, actually. Figured there’d be more in the common areas.” Suzie stated, and measured the distance as the window was hit, “Automatic fire. Don’t suppose you could put me on the security comms?”

“Channel four, for the open.”

She produced her earpiece from down the front of her dress and switched it to UHF, and tapped, “This is Dragon. Ignore the sniper for now. That’s a decoy. Anybody have eyes on the back of the house?”

Josiah laughed, “Dragon. You think the security team knows your codename?”

“Roger, Dragon. We have a two man team moving in your direction from the back of the house. We have three moving to intercept. Hang tight.”

She shrugged, “Well, yeah. Two man team approaching the back door. O’Connor spoke to the security team whilst I was in the car. He does stuff like that.”

Josiah rolled over, “So... Two from the back, sniper in front. This is sounding like a terrible movie for a first date.”

She was tempted to punch him in the face. Instead she moved into a crouch, tucking and tying her dress up higher to make it easier to move, and revealing the holstered weapon on her thigh. Josiah gave a cat whistle, obviously not understanding the severity of the situation.

“Stay put.” She ordered him and dove across the space, sliding into a position by the door and letting him be the bait by himself. She heard a series of gunshots outside, and finally saw his facade of calm shatter.

Suzie waited until a tiny explosion signalled that the door handle had been blown open. The backdoor swung inwards, and she looped around between the attacker’s legs. She jumped to her feet with a spinning kick to flatten one opponent into the building, as she narrowly blocked a knife blow with her arm from the other.

She grabbed the first by the head and slammed him into the building to disorient as she knocked at the knife and ripped the gun out of the second’s hand before he could attempt a wild attack.

Suzie spun and punched downwards, shattering the knee of the dazed man, before turning and catching the knife that very nearly hit her chest. She snapped the blade and sliced open his arm.

The attacker screamed in pain, and she took the opportunity to deliver her knee into their face and knock them onto their back.

A moment later a tranquilliser dart hit them and they went silent. Suzie waved as the security team moved in to take credit for the attack that she had stopped. She untied her dress as she headed back inside, and towards the kitchen sink.

She started the water running and put her hand into it, wincing as the cut across her entire palm stung like crazy. “You got a kit in the house?”

Josiah stared at her in awe, and Suzie glared, “Hey. Jerk. I’m bleeding here. Got a medkit?”

He shook his head, “Oh. Right.”

The clueless department head opened a couple cupboards before he found what he was looking for and brought a basket over to her. She glanced over it, “Alcohol swabs, and the pressure bandage. Can you help me with this?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He said slowly.

She turned the water off and he dabbed at her hand, drying it carefully. She smiled at him sweetly as he began cleaning the wound, and members of the security team started spreading out in the house, sound-

ing off if secure. “I... I’ve never seen anyone fight like that. Not in person.”

Suzie rolled her eyes, “Of course not, corporate. You’re a researcher. You’re not there when people actually get hurt. It’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

He stretched the bandage across her skin, and the edges seemed to attach themselves to her skin, before going taut. She’d recognised it as one of the things that McIntyre had brought to market a few years back. It didn’t sell that well, as cotton is cheaper. But she was grateful for it now, feeling the gel in the material numbing the affected area.

Josiah leaned back, “All done. How’s it feel?”

“Like I made a mistake.” Suzie admitted and moved her hand slowly, “It’ll be fine. Um... I’ll be with you in a moment. Need to check in with my boss.”

She turned and tapped her earpiece, “Call O’Connor.”

The device chirped, and she heard him pick up, “This better not be about this morning, Suzie.”

“Security is cleaning up here, but I have two more people for you to question. Possibly four, if the security team caught the other team that set up an automated gun position.” Suzie gave her report.

“You were attacked, Dragon? Was it another kidnapping attempt?”

She looked over the fallen men as security kept weapons trained on them. “Seems so. I can see a hypodermic needle, so I suppose it depends on what was meant to go in it. But I doubt its for diabetes. Gear is European. Probably mercenaries. Maybe... Red Eagle Securities. Patches have been removed.”

“Any injuries?”

“Scratch to me. Cut one of the mercs on the arm, broke another’s leg. Josiah is uninjured. Haven’t heard about Kim and Stephen yet.” Suzie glanced to the stairs, “Forget that. Kim’s fine.”

Her friend sprinted down the stairs and over to her, grabbing her in a massive hug. Suzie patted her gently and waited for it to end.

Kim looked up wide-eyed at her, “Suzie -”

She pointed at her headpiece.

"Thanks for the heads up, Dragon. I'm cutting your leave short. And your beach trip." John said tiredly, "We're moving all four of you to a secure location. Flight is inbound. Call response, password of the day."

"Confirmed. Call response." Suzie replied and hung up.

She gave Kim a sympathetic squeeze, "You okay?"

"I'm fine." The woman shook her head, "What about you? Someone is trying to kill you."

"No, they're not." Suzie tried to reassure her, "And I'm fine. Though... You need to grab your bag. You too, Josiah. Stephen. We're leaving."

Josiah stood up, "I'll grab your gear, Suzie. You keep... Doing whatever it is that you're doing."

"Don't forget my laptop." She waved at the tipped over couch.

She walked over to the head of security, he gave a short nod, "Miss Drakes. Area is secure, but I don't know how they got in, yet. I'd like to move you to the garage until we can confirm there's no one else still onsite."

"Nope." She shook her head, "I have someone on the way to move all four of us. It shouldn't surprise me, but there's a suitable landing spot for a helicopter nearby?"

"An emergency zone outside." He nodded his head, "But it's just a dirt bowl. Planning on flying out?"

"Maybe." She shrugged, "There may be another attempt on us. The pilot will have to authenticate. Frankly, the less you know, the better. You shut down the automated gun turret. Can you give me any details?"

He shrugged, "Military spec. MS1A remote position."

Suzie nodded and looked around the room again, "I'm going to need for you to clear your men from the room. They're blocking the exits. As for how your security net was penetrated, your man on that roof can't see. There's a tree in the way. I noted it on arrival. Seems you failed to correct it in time. That's where I would have come in, for this kind of attack."

The security chief nodded slowly, "Fall back! You two, set up position at the emergency landing. Notify me if you see an approach."



She relaxed and took her bag as Josiah arrived. He smiled sheepishly, “I just sort of shoved your other clothes in the top.”

Suzie blinked and remembered how she’d got changed and just sort of left everything dumped on the floor. So now he’d seen her sizes, or at least her taste in underwear. Awesome.

She took the bag and swung it over her shoulder, cocking her head. She tapped her earpiece as the phone rang. “Inbound, Dragon.”

“Confirmed.” She replied and nodded at the other three and stepped outside, her eyes skating over the environment.

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Kim Nolan

She tried not to hyperventilate. Not only was she in the back of a helicopter for the first time ever, four people were sitting across from her with zip-tied hands and feet. None of them were saying anything at all, but she felt really queasy having the people who had attacked so close at hand.

Suzie, for her part, seemed completely at ease. She wasn’t laughing and joking, she was attentive. However, the role seemed to suit her friend. The first time that Kim had heard that Suzie had been recruited as a sort of bodyguard for the government, she had thought it sounded plain weird. Not anymore.

Kim had noticed that Suzie had got hurt, a cut on her hand that someone had treated. She also noticed that it seemed to annoy her friend. She always had been a perfectionist, but what kind of person would be annoyed they’d failed to perfectly defend themselves when they were supposed to be having a beach holiday?

It was meant to be boys and movies and drinking. They were supposed to laugh and run around on the sand, teasing each other mercilessly. Making the sort of memories to last a lifetime.

Not... These kinds of memories.

“Cookie?” A voice crackled over the headset.

Kim turned slowly to stare at Suzie, “Is that your answer for everything?”

Suzie reached up and pressed a button on the side of the headset, and nodded at her to repeat herself. Kim reached up to it, “Why is it always cookies with you?”

Suzie laughed and shrugged, holding one out, “Because it works. We’re fine, Kim. Really. Might not seem like it, but we just passed into restricted airspace. We’ll be touching down in a minute.”

Kim shook her head, “You’re nuts, Suzie. But fine. How’d you and Josiah get on?”

The man turned red, and looked over at her in surprise. Kim grinned at her, “What did you do to him?”

Suzie shrugged, “I wanted them to think I was distracted. So I sat in his lap. So I could tip the couch. So... I guess you can say I made sure the awkward will always last.”

Kim giggled and shook her head, “Sounds like you.”

The helicopter jerked as it began descending, and her fists balled up. Suzie grabbed one of them in her hand, squeezing gently with her artificial fingers. “You’re fine, Kim.”

She was about as far from fine as she could be, actually. First someone threatened to kidnap her, and then someone shot at the house she was in, with the intention to attack her best friend. She didn’t know if she could ever be fine again.

All the same, the confidence that Suzie had to say it did actually make her feel somewhat better.

As they landed, the prisoners were hustled away, and Kim found herself standing in the middle of an operating military base. Men in fatigues were running rounds nearby, chanting as they went.

A military commander led them away from the helicopter, shouting with Suzie, before the four of them found themselves in the relative quiet of a hangar of some kind. Planes that Kim wouldn’t embarrass herself trying to recognise nearby, before they headed down under the hangar on tiny metal staired ladders that made her feel like she was about to fall.

There, Kim found herself in a normal cafeteria. White floors, high ceilings, and people walking around and chatting, albeit in military uniforms. She was extremely puzzled why there was a cafeteria underneath the hangar.

Suzie turned to them, "Welcome to Alpha Sierra. This will be where we're staying for now. Until we know who is after me, anyway. Sorry to get everyone caught up in this, really. We've been assigned guest quarters down that hall. But this being a military base, it'll be two to a room. Trust me, we're lucky to get that."

"Guess we won't be shopping together." Kim smiled weakly.

Suzie shrugged, "Maybe not. But there is a pool upstairs. Fancy making Stephen jealous? There's only a handful of women on this site. Some nonsense about women being noncombatants. But, you might have noticed the stares."

Kim nodded slowly, "Thirsty boys."

"No one is going to touch you." Suzie laughed, "As of this moment, everyone on site has been told that us four are ASIO civilian consultants. The kind of people to ruin careers or lives if they file a complaint."

Stephen nodded slowly, "Any particular orders for us, Suzie? Places you want us to stick to?"

"For now, its best if you stick close. We should move around as a group." Suzie shrugged, "I know the base pretty well. This is where I went through basic. Mostly new recruits around here, but there's a few top secret areas as well. Anyone you meet down here, has at least minimal national security clearance. Above the ground, probably not."

Josiah frowned, "You mentioned a pool. So I suppose you're our activities director? Right now... I could use a sleep."

"We'll settle in for now." Suzie shrugged, "Here's your key cards. Don't lose it. Or I'll hurt you. Here are your identification badges. Wear them at all times. They can survive the shower. How about we meet for dinner over there in a couple of hours?"

The boys headed off to find their room, and Suzie took her hand. "You're looking pale, Kim. Coping?"

“Nooo.” She said and shook her head, and then sighed, “Not your fault either. Don’t beat up yourself on it.”

“Wasn’t.” Suzie shook her head and smiled at her, “Mostly fantasising on beating up on the people who ruined my best friend’s weekend.”

They arrived at the room, and Suzie swiped her card to get them in. The room was sparse, without decoration. On one side was a bunk bed, and on the other was a mirror and wash basin. Beside that was a pressure shower, without a curtain.

Suzie grinned excitedly, “Man, officers always have it the best.”

Kim stared at her, “This is luxury?”

“Yeah.” Her friend shrugged and slipped out of her shoes, before vaulting onto the top bunk and letting out a sigh. “Last time I was here, Kim, I was crammed in a tent with thirty other people, all guys.”

Kim frowned, “Uh... What about getting changed?”

“Stuck to the shower stalls.” Suzie replied and rolled over where she could see her, “But a tent in forty degree heat and a minor fly plague sucked. This is awesome. I know it isn’t what you wanted, but O’Connor is good at what he does. He’ll work it out soon enough.”

Kim nodded nervously and sat on the bottom bunk, “I wanna throw up.”

“That’s normal too. And you might.” Suzie said sympathetically.

She held her head in her hands, slowly breathing through the panic attack, “Uhm. Distract me. What’s there to do here? On a military base.”

“There’s the pool. Often a game of pool volleyball going on.” Suzie repeated, “There’s also basketball games to play and watch. Oh, and there’s a bunch of consoles around the place. We could play some games. I also have my laptop connected to the network, so we can stream movie and stuff.”

Kim sighed, “Sure. That doesn’t sound as bad. How’s the food?”

“It’s actually pretty great. Professional chefs. Think about three-star restaurant level.” Suzie shrugged, and reached down to pat her on the head, “Plus, we could order in, if you wanted. Even cram the guys in

here with us. Or video chat them. I asked someone to get a secure laptop to Stephen.” Suzie reassured her.

Kim laughed weakly, “And I thought I was a mess before. Someone shot at us.”

“Kim. I’m not upset.”

She looked up at her friend, “Yeah. You’re treating this like its... Normal.”

“Not the first time its happened to me.” Suzie said slowly, “Uh... If you guys weren’t involved, they wouldn’t have bothered putting me into protective custody. I’ve had plenty of people take potshots at me before.”

Kim winced, “How... How do you live with that?”

“Mostly by breaking the faces of the people who try it.” Suzie shrugged.

She flopped onto the bed, wincing at the hardness of the mattress, “That sounds so healthy.”

Something hard hit her head and Kim glanced up and took it slowly, “Why are you handing me your computer?”

“Your boyfriend is calling.”



### 3 Alpha Sierra

Suzie Drakes

She slipped out quietly into the hallway to ignore Kim and Stephen, and placed her call.

“Hey, Suzie.”

She sighed and rubbed her temples, “Please tell me you have something. Anything.”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you if I did.” John replied.

Suzie leaned into the wall and slid down onto the ground, “Probably not. But its my friends suffering because of me right now, and I have no idea what to tell any of them. No idea how to explain why this is happening.”

“True. But officially, that would be more reason not to.” John repeated, “Ah... This is about you. I know that, and you know that. The kid whose arm you dislocated, tried to drop a tracker on you.”

She winced, “So, you figured that one. He was just some idiot hired by Davian. Nothing to worry about, really. I wasn’t sure, and I was going to tell you, but then the thing this morning happened...”

“You don’t get to decide what is or isn’t important to tell me, Suzie.” John admonished her, “You already get special treatment. Be nice if you didn’t just flaunt it, kid.”

“Sorry.” She apologised.

John sounded tired, “Good. Now, moving on. The van from the attack this morning was stolen from a storage facility. Child’s play. The people hired thought they were part of a kidnap-themed surprise party. They headed out from a party venue and were told to bring Kim back there. You scared the pants off them, and so they fought back.”

“Poorly.” Suzie added.

She could hear the exasperation in his voice, “Anyway, they were paid by a business credit card. The account has links to Rolton Innovate. I presume you know who they are?”

“Multinational conglomerate dealing in modern weaponry, legacy tech, and toilet paper.” Suzie answered, “Basically, McIntyre’s main

competitor. That's not a coincidence. Kim dates a McIntyre, and suddenly the business is in my face every time I turn around. Could Stephen be the real target?"

"Possibly. And I do only mean possibly. Every chance this is about you." O'Connor said cautiously, "We're not supposed to know, but McIntyre is doing the early legal work to see if they can buy out Rolton without falling afoul of anti-monopoly laws, which complicates things from your perspective."

It could mean she was being targeted by someone connected to McIntyre Industries, or that someone at McIntyre was the goal. It broadened the list of feasible backers to at least several hundred people, and that was just for one of the investors in this scheme, who were willing to spend a hell of a lot to see it done.

"Red Eagle Securities?" She moved along. She needed more information to make her assessment of the present dangers.

"Disavowed involvement, which is unusual." John mused, "Apparently the members you caught disappeared on a sortie in South Africa about six months ago. Hired by a local warlord to do the usual terrible things to keep some lithium mines open. Our intelligence backs that up. They were presumed KIA."

Suzie frowned, "Someone outbid the contract, and put them on payroll."

"That's my guess." He agreed with her, "As to who could, and would, annoy an organisation like that one, the answers are a little bit more difficult."

She tapped her fingers slowly, thinking, "Josiah's file is kinda huge, John. And he manipulated his way into making sure he and I were both in the same place. Willing to throw his cousin under the bus to do it, too."

"Possible. Definitely possible." John hesitated, "But we're working with him. He's in the process of hooking up a half dozen top secret projects that I can't tell you anything about. Today, I'd say he's an ally. I can't say about tomorrow, but I would be surprised if he was actively working against any member of ASIO."



Suzie glanced up as the lights flickered, and tapped her earpiece. The call had dropped as well. She should probably call him back.

She stood up slowly and looked around the cafeteria, no one else seemed to really have noticed. She didn't want to sound the alarm over something that was nothing, and this was a military base. If there was something, then there would be a literal alarm going off.

She took a deep breath to try and calm herself. She was just feeling more on edge than usual. It was nothing. Right now, and right here, she was safe. The only entrances came from the hangar above, and all of them required authorisation to access.

"Hey."

Suzie rolled her eyes and turned around, "So, you're going to be awkward about this. Seriously, I don't have the guts to be that kind of girl. It was just for the attack."

Josiah shrugged, "Yeah, I got it. I'm more feeling awkward because we're standing underground in a top secret security clearance area like that's an everyday occurrence."

"It is. For the both of us." Suzie rolled her eyes, and turned to look at him, "I have codeword clearance, Josiah. I know exactly who you are. Don't pretend."

He stared at her, "H... How in the hell... Do you have codeword clearance? You're just a bodyguard, aren't you?"

"Why would ASIO, who are forbidden to act on Australian soil, usually, supply a bodyguard service?" Suzie pointed out the oddity.

Josiah frowned and then his face relaxed slowly, "You're... Investigating your clients? The international connections?"

She gave him a golf clap.

He winced, "And you mentioned Atlas before. That really should have got my attention. I know most of the project is top secret, but I guessed... I don't know. Still don't know why you'd know about it. Unless you've investigated me."

Suzie shrugged, and considered how to answer, "Yes, but no. Never investigated you. Haven't had a reason to. Can't tell you why I know about Atlas. But... You could always try and get my attention."

“Are you challenging me to work out why a brilliant engineer might know about one of the hardest engineering projects in the nation?” Josiah asked.

She shrugged non-committal.

He’d either work it out, or he wouldn’t.

“You’re an interesting one, I’ll give you that.” Josiah said at length, the two of them both standing in a hallway to give their friends privacy. “How did you get started Engineering Corp?”

“I can’t tell you that, either.” Suzie surprised him.

He looked her up and down again, and sighed heavily, “Can’t, or won’t? Or is it a little bit of both?”

“Can’t.” Suzie repeated, “I don’t say things I don’t mean. At least, not without a sniper about to take a potshot at me.”

“So you do think I’m cute, then.”

“Also rude, arrogant, and not nearly as smart as you think you are. Looks aren’t a saving grace. Puppies are cute.” Suzie said to little effect.

Josiah crossed his arms, “So you think you’re smarter than I am?”

“You’re antagonising a girl you know nothing about other than the fact she beats up people for a living. And she’s the friend of your brother’s girlfriend. Yeah. I’d say you’re stupid.” Suzie shrugged.

It was a dangerous game she was playing, considering that he might be manipulating her environment. However, she needed more information to make her assessment of the situation. Getting under his skin and pissing him off was dead easy. It seemed like the appropriate course of action.

Albeit one that O’Connor would never have approved.

Suzie was at least aware of the dangers she was messing with. It seemed that despite being determined to get to know her as a person, or at least claiming it, that Josiah hadn’t managed to uncover any of her past. He was attempting to provide her with a challenge, but falling short.

The two of them considered who was underestimating who, and both felt insulted by the results.

“Chess?” Josiah offered weakly.

She looked at him with derision, "Fine. If I win, you apologise for being such a stuck up prig."

"And if I win?"

Suzie shrugged, "This is a negotiation. Generally that means you make an offer first. Or do I have to explain even that?"

He smiled slowly, a thought occurring, "If I win, you come work for me. Just one project. You might even enjoy it."

"Lot of faith in yourself."

Josiah shrugged, "I'm a grandmaster. If you want all the facts."

"Whatever." Suzie rolled her eyes. She'd never tried to claim any title for herself. She didn't feel a need to constantly measure her self worth against the rest of the world, who basically didn't care if she lived or died.

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Kim Nolan

Stephen frowned, looking around, "Are we late? I hope we didn't send them off wandering... Oh. You don't think they're..."

"Nope." Kim shook her head and pointed, "I don't think they're making out. They're being competitive instead. Suzie is going to be absolutely insufferable if she loses. What about Josiah?"

Her boyfriend scratched the side of his neck, "Well, I don't know. It's been five years since he actually lost a chess match. And that was to an AI trained to beat him. So... Downright awful?"

"I think I remember that. Was in the news for a bit. Does he not play chess anymore?" Kim asked vaguely.

Stephen sighed heavily, "No, he still plays."

"Aw, shit." Kim swore as she realised that the two of them were about to become mortal enemies. Even a draw would bring out the worst in the two freaks. What had she done to surround herself with weirdos like this?

He grunted his agreement, and then looked around, “Well, I guess my credit card should work. What do you want for dinner? Looks like there’s some range.”

Thinking with his stomach. Just like a guy. He didn’t realise the enormity of what was happening right in front of his face. Hadn’t noticed how half the cafeteria was now congregating or moving towards the simple chess game. People had money riding on this, too.

The outcome was going to determine just how pissed off at the newcomers the rest of the base was.

She didn’t want angry soldiers and a pissed off Suzie.

Kim frowned, “Um. I just noticed. Josiah is taking his time to think through his moves. Suzie isn’t. Is she just... Messing with him? Not taking it seriously? That’s going to make him angrier, isn’t it? Even if he wins.”

Stephen turned her head slowly, and she breathed in sharply as he gently kissed her. Her heart fluttered, and he grinned at her, “Got your attention now? We get to have our date. I mean, it isn’t under starlight, like I planned... But...”

Kim rolled her eyes, “Yeah, you got my attention.”

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Suzie Drakes

Entire stipends were going to change hands within a few moments. Even a few of the officers had found themselves placing wagers, making it harder for the higher ups to stamp out the consequences. A simple chess match.

A match that was beginning to piss her off.

He took his time placing his pieces, arranging his gambits, and seemed on the surface to be trying to control the board. Destabilise the difference between their pieces, dominate the centre.

Yet, it was all just the surface. He really was good at the game. It would take a master to seem like he was trying, whilst arranging for her eventual victory. It didn't matter what move she made, he re-positioned to give her a stronger advantage.

At first she'd thought it was some dumb move to try and tell her his phone number or encode a message, the movements being so erratic. As usual, it turned out that she was overthinking things. He was playing a sympathy card.

So now she was bored, and somewhat trying to lose but disinterested in the game. If it weren't for the intense betting, she would have walked away and told him never to speak to her again.

She didn't like or want sympathy from anyone.

Ever.

She knew his track record, of course. His claim to be some wizard at chess hadn't come out of the blue. She'd seen the news reports, and that meant they were indelibly imprinted into her memory for all time. He probably thought he was making some grand romantic gesture by arranging for her to win.

He also probably thought he was doing it in such a way that she wouldn't see it. Which was an insult to her intelligence. She was sure that at least some of the onlookers had guessed what he was doing. He was subtle, but she wasn't being.

Suzie sighed and knocked over her queen.

Josiah grinned as the noise erupted around them, "I suppose that means you come work for me, then."

"Not really." Suzie stood up, "It just means you're a stuck up prig who can't even conceive of treating me like an equal. Use your door card when you get dinner. But don't talk to me."

She walked away, and considered. Maybe this had been the point. Whatever project he had in mind for her. It wasn't the first suggestion of her working for him, or the first time he'd tried to see if he could pique her professional interest. Those efforts were more subtle than his chess game.

Technically, he had won.

She picked up some sushi and katsu, before finding a secluded table to sit. She knew where the others were, but they seemed to be having fun. Laughing and feeding each other. Seemed Kim had somehow managed to break through Stephen's shell.

"Dragon, you there?"

She tapped her earpiece, "Sorry about that. Power glitch, here. Must have knocked out the cell tower. Go ahead, Chief."

"I've made my decision to bring you back in."

Suzie blinked and controlled her breathing tightly, "Sir, this is surprising to me. Not that I'm ungrateful considering how awkward things are getting. What changed your mind?"

"We found the truck driver."

Suzie smiled slowly, "Want me to take a run at him?"

"Pretty pointless. He's dead."

Suzie winced, and considered her options. She had been protecting a corrupt senator, who had several failed assassination attempts at him by his investors. During which, she was supposed to stop one attempt, whilst another played out in the background.

The perpetrator of the failed attempt had escaped, only to be removed as a loose end soon after being identified.

Could this be about Davian? She'd been removed, on leave. It was unnecessary to attack her, as protocol would have dictated her removal from the case.

There seemed to be no link between the two cases, and yet the timing made ignoring any connection, however tenuous it might be, unwise.

The fact was, they lacked information.

"If he's dead, then what can I do for you, Chief? Doesn't sound like much of a lead. I'm not a forensic anything." Suzie offered with bitter disappointment.

O'Connor yawned, obviously exhausted, "Wild has something I'd like you to run down. A very flimsy connection between the attack on Davian and McIntyre Industries. Is it possible that McIntyre is one of his backers?"

She tapped her fingers on the table, "Possible. But not likely. Possible that someone with the ability to divert funds is a backer. Influential, but not C-level. Josiah has been trying to hire me. A particular project in mind."

"You see a connection?"

Suzie bit her lip, "I don't know. It makes me an uncomfortable, with the timing. But that... He'd be more subtle. Wouldn't he?"

"Depends. Investors like to see returns, Dragon." John replied uncertainly, "I'll come out and say it. I don't like your proximity to McIntyre right now. I considered ordering you not to go, but we have no concrete reason not to trust any of them."

She sighed heavily, "I have an excuse to accept. It won't stand out."

"Alright. I'll keep Wild in place for now. You see what else you can dig up. But don't take any unnecessary risk. And I want daily updates. I don't care how uncertain you are. You tell me." John caved.

Wasn't like they had much of a choice.

She hung up, and leaned back in her chair, thoughts swirling. Her largest and primary concern in all of this was keeping Kim sheltered from the situation. Suzie knew how traumatic it could be, losing control of everything, having someone take that away from you.

Her friend needed the time and space to come to terms with it, and any escalation was likely to prevent that.

"Do you always look like you want to hit someone? Or is that just your thinking face?"

Suzie glared up at him, "You won. I'll do your project. But today... I told you not to speak to me. Go. Away. I'm sure you can find someone else to speak to."

He sat down slowly at the table and shook his head, "Didn't really feel like a win. You noticed I was cheating."

"Yeah. You let it drag on long enough." She replied stiffly.

He shrugged, "When a guy sees a pretty -"

"Finish that sentence and I'll show you that stilettos are unnecessary to drive the heel of a shoe through someone's torso." Suzie threatened him lightly.

He cringed at the thought and shrugged, "Fine. Maybe this will cheer you up. The project. I've been trying to get it off the ground for a couple years now, but... Half the technology needed to make it work doesn't exist yet. Just your typical supersoldier exoskeleton."

Suzie cocked her head as he pulled his phone out and handed it over to her. She flicked at the designs on the screen. Most were just concept art, but there were a few diagrams for circuits and so on.

At least his phone was a secure one. She forgot to confiscate Kim's, but even if someone had successfully tracked it, it wouldn't do them any good.

"Missing power source capable of running it. Missing drive train capable of sustained movement. Missing inertial dampening to keep the pilot alive." She assessed and handed it back to him, "Are you trying to get me to embarrass myself? This is a fantasy, not a project."

"All the best ones are." Josiah smiled at her and shrugged, "War is horrible, but a fact. Peace doesn't last. Never. But if I can find a way to deprecate sending brigades in, for sending a single pilot, then I will. A handful of these could defend an entire national border. Change the landscape."

"From the inventor of a city destroyer, that sounds incredibly disingenuous." Suzie laughed softly and sighed, "Fine. How am I supposed to help you achieve this fantasy?"

"Pick something." He replied idly, "Drive train might fit, considering you basically made your arm from clockwork. Which is highly impressive, by the way. You might have outstripped my own designs for prostheses."

Maybe he was interested in reducing casualties from war. Most of his work was devoted to helping soldiers recover afterwards. Putting back together their physical bodies, so that someone else stood a chance at piecing together their minds.

It was easy to think the worst of him.

Yet... What kind of person wondered if someone was capable of organising this kind of military exercise within a few days of meeting them? Hiring mercenaries and attempting kidnappings.

It wasn't normal to view people that way.



"I'll ask for a lab to be set up here. I have permission to leave, but I don't want to put Kim here by herself. I mean, your brother might be nice, not that I'd know... But she's my friend." Suzie stated.

Josiah frowned, "This is pretty proprietary right now... Not sure how comfortable I am with that. We're not that far from one of my facilities. I could arrange for you to fly in and out."

"You're not supposed to be communicating with the outside world. You are a possible target." Suzie rolled her eyes.

He looked at her in surprise, "You're not?"

"Doesn't seem that likely at this stage." She lied to him, watching to see how he would react.

His pupils dilated, his nostrils flared. His heart accelerated. She could see all the minor signals that he was surprised, and irritated. He tried to hide it well, but he disagreed vehemently with that assessment. Might be because it was an obvious lie, and she was treating him as unintelligent. Might be because he had insider information and was aware she was the target.

Yet, information was information. No matter how seemingly small or irrelevant it was, it increased the data she had to make a decision on.

She continued on as if she hadn't broken off the sentence, "I'm only talking with my boss. If you think they've let me out of their sights, think again. He's like an overprotective grandfather sometimes. Governmental perk."

He seemed to calm significantly. She found him difficult to read. As if he was always tightly controlling not just his emotions, but his thoughts. A habit of a practised liar, which shouldn't be surprising, considering he was a corporate lackey.

She kicked him in the shin.

"What the hell was that for?"

Suzie shrugged.

— — —

John O'Connor

He flicked off the light and locked his office, feeling exhaustion creeping in from his day. Suzie was absolutely brilliant, but she was a handful. In fact, he doubted that there actually was anyone out there that could handle her. He certainly couldn't.

Brilliant, traumatised, and barely out of her teens. In any reasonable world no one would be considering putting her anywhere but in a psychologist's office, for several years.

Unfortunately, the world wasn't reasonable. The threats that they faced required an eye for detail that couldn't be taught, and a creativity to handle things on the fly that couldn't be drilled into you. Suzie was what was needed to get the job done.

He always felt guilt after he talked to her. She was a cracked tool, and he was using her to breaking point. He had to wonder what would make her snap, when the point would come that she missed something and it cost people lives. Because when that eventually happened, he had no expectation at all that she would be able to cope with that thought.

He felt his phone buzz, and sighed, tapping his earpiece, "This better be an emergency."

"It is." Jack Bush's voice came back gravely, and with a considerable amount of interference.

O'Connor rubbed his face, "Go ahead, Wild."

"Incident at Alpha Sierra. I'm still on my way over, but from what I understand, Dragon and a civilian have disappeared, another civilian is in a coma, and a final civ is being held for questioning." Jack spoke quickly and stiffly.

O'Connor winced, and ran through the details of his last conversation with Suzie in his head. He couldn't come up with a lot of things that might be the catalyst for a kidnapping on military soil.

"Alpha Sierra is a top secret clearance facility. How the fuck did this happen?"

The call sputtered for a moment, and Jack's voice was strained, "I'm still on my way over, boss. For now, the chief suspect is Josiah McIntyre.

Like I said, though, they managed to hold him for questioning. Which makes me doubt it.”

“Understood. I’ll join you there soon.” He said, and the agent either hung up or dropped out of satellite range.

Suzie’s call had dropped earlier as well.

Just a thought, but one he couldn’t really do anything about just yet. He wasn’t at the location, which meant he couldn’t do anything. He fumbled with his car keys as he placed a call to the base commander.

“Who is this?”

He smiled as he unlocked the door and stepped into the vehicle, “This is John O’Connor. Confirmation code alpha, sierra, foxtrot, whisky, niner, niner.”

It never got old, hearing the military snap to attention when they ran his code and got back no information other than to do exactly what they were told, when they were told. “Sir. Yessir. What can I do for you?”

“You can explain how an agent of mine who I placed into your protective custody is now missing.” O’Connor growled, “I just got a call informing me that Suzie Drakes and Kim Nolan are missing. Would also like to know why you didn’t bother to inform me yet.”

“Sir.” The commander sounded like he was sweating bullets, “I only found out myself a few minutes ago. I haven’t even got a report in any system. So how did you find out?”

How the hell did Jack know? That was a decent question. But not one that O’Connor was willing to raise right this moment with the commander. “Son, did you not see the profile when you confirmed my code?”

“Sir, yessir.” The commander replied, “It is just that right now, I am looking a leak. Someone knocked our power and communications offline, for only a few seconds, and used it to penetrate the base. It was professional, it was fast. We’re still scrubbing cameras, but they didn’t all come back up at the same pace.”

He winced, “Someone penetrated a top security military base with military precision. They also had layouts, and an understanding of the specifics of your network to cover their tracks. That is... Terrifying. How-

ever, knowing my agent, she didn't let them get a clean getaway. Tell me you have a scene, and have preserved it."

"Yessir." The commander swallowed, "Stephen McIntyre is in a critical condition. We're in the process of airlifting him out. He was shot at point blank range, through the neck. We believe that the other missing individual, Miss Nolan, was used as leverage to gain your agent's compliance. We have a cordon going up right now."

O'Connor pulled onto the highway, "I am thirty minutes out. I want a report within twenty minutes of my arrival, and I want my landing cleared. Is that clear?"

"Sir. Yessir." The commander barked, "We will be waiting, and we will get this handled, sir."

He hung up, and then rang the office. One of the nightshift picked up tiredly, "Sir?"

"Agent Wild just notified me to a situation at Alpha Sierra that he is on the way to attend to. I also believe that's bullshit. Track him down. Now." He ordered.

"Uh... Sir... Agent Wild is in your office."

A chill ran down his spine, "Issue lockdown. Now. Do not let him leave the building."

He couldn't afford to turn around, not when Suzie had been taken captive by someone who was using her best, and maybe only, friend against her. If Jack was being less than truthful about what he was doing, then he had chosen the right distraction.

The lockdown, however, would automatically trigger a protocol, and outside agents would be called in to handle the situation. He just had to hope it was enough, soon enough.

Everything had just blown up in their faces.

## 4 The Red Eagle

Suzie Drakes

She groaned and flinched at the bitter taste on her swollen tongue. She sat up with a wince and rubbed her head, hearing the breathing of someone else in the room. "I was going peacefully, you didn't need to drug me."

"Well, that's not true, is it?"

She opened her eyes blearily, "And you're not Josiah. What? The coward couldn't be bothered to keep an eye on his investment himself? Where is the fucker?"

"Attending to business." The man she didn't recognise replied, "For now, there is water beside the cot. The plans he would like to look at are on that desk. Get comfortable, and familiar. You won't be allowed to leave this room for some time."

He left, sealing a metallic door behind him.

The room itself was nothing to be surprised about. It was a prison cell, plain and simple. It was more furnished than most, but it was still a cell. The toilet was nearby, and didn't even have a seat, was metallic and looked to be low flush. She was sitting on a military cot, and beside her was a cheap and nasty bedside table.

She picked up the water and looked dubiously at what was probably a mild painkiller for the headache. It could be another drug to influence her in some way, but if they were honest about wanting her help on a project, then it was extremely likely that they wanted her doing that without a clear head.

She took the tablet and swallowed it.

Suzie walked over, holding her pounding head and spread out the paper on the rickety and partly rotten desk. Seemed like they were quite determined not to give her any tools she could potentially use to escape, not that she needed any.

As much as it would suck, she could probably rework her arm into a makeshift weapon. However, with Kim nowhere in sight, and definitely in their control, she did not have enough cards to play against McIntyre.

Bastard.

She'd been saying she was going to work on the project with him. He didn't have to go and do... This. Not unless his goal was to keep it outside of military hands. She wasn't sure why he would do that.

Maybe just corporate over-protectiveness, which wouldn't explain the urgency unless his backers were threatening to kneecap him. Or maybe he wasn't planning on selling to any legitimate government. Which was a more terrifying thought.

Either way, until she could find a way to get her friend out, she did not have the power in this relationship. They hadn't hesitated before shooting Stephen.

McIntyre had ordered his own brother shot, right in front of her.

Now, she was in a windowless cell.

The situation was as clear as it needed to be. She was right fucked.

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Kim Nolan

She'd stopped crying. Not because she didn't want to anymore, not because she'd somehow managed to make herself feel numb, she hadn't. She'd stopped crying because she had no more tears to cry.

All she could do was rock against the wall, as the image of the gun ripping through Stephen's throat hit her again and again and again. A moment before the hot muzzle was pressed into her own neck. She could feel it there, the blister that had formed when a weapon was jammed against her to threaten her friend.

She'd never heard Suzie that scared before, asking that they stop, offering to do whatever it was that they wanted.

And who were they?

The little brother of the man she was dating. She had dragged Suzie into this. Her boyfriend had been shot by his own brother, for a chance to get at her.

Kim didn't know what to feel more guilty about.

That her boyfriend was somewhere out there, possibly alive, possibly dead, or that her best friend was being forced into creating some psychopath's dream weapon, and that she was the bait to do it.

She was the reason Suzie was caught up in this.

Kim jumped as she heard a crackle, followed by a whine, and she looked around in terror.

"Well, that took forever." Suzie's annoyed voice came from somewhere overhead, "Freakin' old junk. Tapped into the intercom, Kim. I can see you, too. Creeps put some cameras in our cells, hidden ones. Didn't need to hide 'em. You're going to be okay. I swear it. You will be okay."

She spread her hands in amazement, "The fuck!? How the fucking hell am I ever going to be okay again, Suzie!?"

"Yeah, I did say camera. Not microphone." Her friend replied, "Oh, look. Seems I pissed someone off. Maybe we can get some answers. I'm getting you out of this, Kim. Stay strong. I'll be there for you, soon."

She sobbed weakly, chest heaving, as she felt even more scared than before. If Suzie had been trying to buck her up, it hadn't worked in the least. She didn't know how she could do this.

She didn't... She didn't... Kim's thoughts spiralled off.

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John O'Connor

He looked at the scene in disbelief.

O'Connor hadn't felt this way in a long time, and had reviewed a number of possible crime scenes. Sometimes in person, sometimes based on reports. None had felt as phoney as this one at first glance.

"You are kidding me, right?" He raised an eyebrow, "Please tell me this is a joke and that Suzie is fine."

The commander was sweating bullets, “Uh... No sir. This is exactly as we found things.”

“You didn’t find jackshit.” O’Connor rubbed his face, “Nothing happened here. Not unless you count someone hacking together a play in front of you, and you actually buying it. That... That is not bloodspray from someone who was shot. If I had to guess, someone ripped open a bag.”

“This is where we found McIntyre. Bleeding out.”

He nodded, “Exactly. When have you ever found someone fallen perfectly on top of a gunshot spray? You fall above it at these angles. Forget it. You’re not a military cop. This isn’t where it happened. Can I see the rooms, now?”

Someone swiped a keycard and held open a door. The smell hit him straight away. Bleach wasn’t exactly the most subtle of things, and that should have been noticed even by someone untrained.

So something had happened in the room, and those involved wanted to move the crime scene for some reason. Wouldn’t be the first time the army had tried to cover up a horrifying crime, or even a mild one. It was a cultural problem.

He stepped into the doorway, carefully avoiding the artistic rendition that might still reveal something to the other investigators, and took in the sight. This was more like it.

He could see where Suzie had caught her hair, dragged from the top bunk. A few stray hairs, not much more, but yanked forcefully from her head. He could see a piece of plastic from where a laptop had struck the ground, and broken a chip free. A laptop that had been carefully placed onto the lower bed, despite belonging to Suzie.

He could see the shine on the walls where spots of blood had been cleaned, and beneath the bleach detect the smell of pizza and popcorn. He stepped over and eased aside the pillow on the bottom bunk with his gloved hands to reveal the phone. It was cracked and shattered from a face-down fall. He couldn’t tell when it had happened, but it was recent because the phone was pretty useless in the current state, and the graphic designer had used it extensively right before the holiday from hell.



There were traces of blood between shards of glass on the screen. He could also see some other clear liquid trapped here and there, suggesting that someone had attempted to clean it.

At a best guess, Suzie had been on the top bunk, using her laptop. Kim had been on the bottom bunk. Someone else had been in the room, someone that they knew and trusted, at least to some extent. Enough that Suzie had thought them fairly harmless.

That person had dragged Suzie off the top bunk, when Kim had made a scramble for it, and been knocked down, where she shattered her phone. A phone that both Suzie and the army had failed to confiscate, allowing the group to be tracked easily to this location.

He lay down on the ground, looking underneath the bunk, and saw a few flecks of blood here and there that had been missed. The blood had sprayed from a downwards angle, spreading out rapidly and with force enough to splatter, from a source at about waist height. Someone on their knees, then.

Stephen had been forced to his knees, and threatened. This was to contain Suzie before she could get a real swing in. The close proximity of the room explained why she hadn't, too afraid of the others getting hurt.

When Suzie had hesitated to do as she was told, Stephen was shot. Then Kim would have been threatened. This was pure conjecture, but it fit the puzzle pieces. With a compliant Suzie on hand, they would have simply walked out. Except that even compliant, the woman would have done her best to undercut them.

He picked up the laptop, and opened it. He frowned as he saw a black screen, and tapped one of the keys, at which point the screen flashed red. So it was a password screen, without any feedback. Something he'd seen her use before. Question was, had she used one of her unguessable personal passwords? Or was it linked up to the main system so he could get tech support to issue an access?

Whilst he was still thinking he heard the webcam shutter, and then the screen came into view. That was surprising. She must have hooked it up to some sort of facial recognition and given him access. Suzie railed against facial recognition's shortcomings on a regular basis.

The only open program was an email client, with a half-written email saying that she had accepted the job that McIntyre had offered her. Which wasn't like Suzie at all, they'd already talked about her doing that. She wouldn't have started putting together a report, especially not around Kim or anyone unauthorised.

It would be like Suzie to try and hide a message in it, however. Especially if she had set up the facial recognition access recently, because she thought she was going to lose access to the device.

O'Connor smiled grimly as he read each capital letter of the email, and saw the name that they spelled out. J O S I A H.

She probably could have just recorded everything on the computer, but she went to the effort of leaving an inconspicuous note. She always did overthink everything to the extreme.

He closed the laptop and placed it down carefully where he had found it. Suzie was unlikely to have calmly named her kidnapper the way she had. Instead, she had linked him to either the attack on the house, or the senator, or both. Or even found concrete proof that he was the target.

Determining which was irritatingly frustrating, due to the clandestine nature of Suzie's message. O'Connor had to hope that she had left him with something more than that.

Of course, she had.

That was why the crime scene had been staged, and moved. Suzie had left another message in the room, and the military had chosen to attempt to cover it up. Unfortunately, as primitive as bleach was, it was fairly effective at destroying that sort of specific evidence. He could easily prove that this was the real crime scene, but recovering Suzie's message might not even be possible.

He tapped his earpiece as his phone buzzed, "O'Connor."

"Wild." Jack's voice came back, "The lockdown was the right move, but damn it all, John. I wasn't getting you out of the way. Well, not for the reasons you think."

"You're not in a jail cell, I take it." He sighed heavily.

The agent laughed sarcastically, "Uh... No. I'm Section Eight, O'Connor. Today's codeword is yellow orchid."

Section Eight. A counter-terrorism unit embedded inside ASIO, with the goal of ensuring that Australia's own intelligence services were not penetrated by other state actors. A sort of internal-affairs department, but with endless resources, little legal oversight, and the ability to disappear their targets with few questions asked.

"Was the target me? Or Dragon?" He asked quietly, hyper aware that he was standing nearby to someone who he believed might have been compromised.

Jack sighed, as if he were exhausted, "McIntyre Industries, actually. Namely, the Atlas Project. I only came across you, and then became embedded with you, after Dragon was brought in to assist with it. She was competent, but overly curious. Despite efforts to compartmentalise the flow of information, she managed to get the full scale of the project, and got you to shut it down. You can see why we might have thought she was a leak."

Atlas. Five innocent letters for a truly dirty secret.

He glanced around the room, and detected the sheen where the bleach had been applied to the wall. Behind the victim. It was possible blowback from the blood spatter, but unlikely over an area that large. He flicked the light switch on and off a couple times to get the rough size and shape.

It was little more than a guess, but it might have been a circle, once.

"Please tell me that we aren't building that at Alpha Sierra."

The agent laughed bitterly, "Got it in one. I suppose that they've done something to get your attention, and that's why you're being so cagey over the phone?"

"Yeah." He frowned, and offered up what he'd already said, "Crime scene was staged, moved. It's a total guess, but there might be a connection."

"Section Eight has the lead on this now, O'Connor. I know she's your agent, but this is ours." Wild ordered him, "Walk away. Let our agents step in and handle it. If I get something concrete, I'll pull you in to save her. Could use your manpower then, not before."

“Acknowledged.” He replied, “I’ll talk to you back at the office, Wild.”

He cut the call, and stepped back into the hallway, but took the phone and laptop with him. He could pull rank to keep those easily enough, and whoever had arranged this terrible cover up couldn’t stop him.

Still concerned him though that the kidnappers had let Suzie leave behind something so obvious. Maybe the message was from them, rather than from her.

A chill ran down his spine as he considered that McIntyre Industries might be trying to finish their own corporate Atlas Project. That kind of weapon in civilian hands could destabilise the fragile peace that the world had known.

There was a reason he had done everything in his power to kill the project.

Sounded like he’d failed.

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Suzie Drakes

It had been easy enough to tap into the intercom system when she’d found which cables was running through her walls. Unfortunately, intercoms are pretty dumb systems, so when she’d spoken to Kim, she’d spoken to the entire facility.

Now her warden was treating her like an idiot, as if she hadn’t known that was exactly what was going to happen. It was just more important for her to let her friend know she wasn’t exactly alone, than it was for her not to get hurt.

“And now, you will remove your arm, or we will remove it in pieces.”

She considered how much she could hurt the man before she had to follow through with his request. He probably thought it reasonable, depriving her access to the advanced technology she had embedded in it. He didn’t understand he was asking her to cut off her own arm, and that most of what was inside it was ancient technology, not super modern.

Suzie glared at him as she pulled up her sleeve, and flinched as the clamps released and her nerves screamed in protest. She held out her arm to him, breathing hard, and offered a threat. "If this even gets a scratch, I'm carving your eyeballs out with a rusty spoon."

The man took it, and rolled his eyes, "If you were in a position to bargain, that might have meant something."

"I hold grudges." She replied, and finally found a match to where she had seen his face before. "Stanley. Though, you prefer Stan, don't you? Sorry. Been a while since I reviewed your file. Impressively clean for a sociopath cleaning decks for McIntyre."

He raised an eyebrow, "So you do remember me. I suppose I should find that flattering."

"No." She shook her head, "I remember everything. That's why you couldn't risk bringing me here awake, right? I bet Josiah had to order you to knock me out. At least he can show me a modicum of respect. You were an arrogant prick when you were an undersecretary for the senator."

"How entertaining." He said flatly, and turned, walking away with her arm and leaving her feeling personally violated. Which, in turn, led her to be less afraid and cautious, and more angry.

The only hold they had on her right now, was Kim. They could hurt her in plenty of ways, but they couldn't afford to push Suzie over the edge. Shouldn't. There was a world of difference between what they thought she was capable of, and what she actually was.

They apparently hadn't realised that their intercom, which was basically a cheap FM transmitter, was now intermittently transmitting an SOS, yet. Wasn't on the right frequency to catch the attention of police, but a kid with a CB or a ham radio enthusiast might possibly notice it, at a fluke. Best she could do for now, without any tools beside being able to loop wire.

They also hadn't seemed to notice that she hadn't tapped into any camera system. What was she going to do that with? A clockwork arm? However, she had confirmed that there were cameras in every cell. Sometimes a bluff was as effective at sniffing out information as actual evidence.

Hidden cameras in a literal prison. That was moronic. A demonstration that the people holding her and Kim weren't actually used to kidnapping people. So obviously the ones who had done the actual extraction were mercenaries, but now she was dealing with the people who had hired them.

She took the opportunity to tear a corner off her blanket, wet it, and bathe away the dust and grim of the day on her arm's stump. She'd considered a couple ways to turn her meagre furniture into weaponry. That part would be easy. However, if they were at all intelligent, they could hurt Kim long before she could find where they had stashed her friend.

Which, dumb as they were, was not in another facility.

The very first lesson of all security was that you had to separate the lock from the key. The walls of the prison weren't the lock keeping her trapped. They were inconsequential in the end. She was being held in a prison of her own mind, one of her own making, formed from an ethical duty to protect someone that she cared about.

They were making it relatively easy to find the tools necessary to remove the barriers keeping her compliant, and nice.

Unlocking the actual door to her physical cell was surprisingly easy. This might have been a prison once, but because it had been stripped of everything useful, they had provided her with a pop-up military cot, springs included. She could pick the lock with her eyes closed, but that wouldn't help if she didn't know exactly where Kim was.

Suzie sat down cross-legged in the middle of the floor, closed her eyes, and went into her memories. Some things were easier to remember than others. Some memories were too abstract to easily match against the real world. She hadn't seen many prison floor plans, so she couldn't just luck out and know exactly where things were.

She could, however, notice the architecture, and its age. Preferences for design. Australia wasn't an old nation, and most of its older prisons had been converted into hotels, not into anything that would make the current situation a possibility. There was one that had been converted into a theatre, another into a shopping centre.

This, however, was more recent than any of those. It still had semi-functional equipment, suggesting that it was a prison of some kind that wasn't part of the public consciousness, a military site.

There was a disturbing number of military sites that were hidden away and off the grid, for holding people who weren't officially considered prisoners, and were sometimes officially dead. This was likely to be one that had been unofficially abandoned when it fell off a list. Something that had slipped through the cracks.

Combine that with being able to drug her unconscious without needing extensive medical care before waking up, and the number of locations where she could be was quite limited. Assuming that she was knocked out near Alpha Sierra. Memory problems were common. Knocking someone out was almost never safe to do, and resulted in all kinds of minor, or major, brain traumas.

Whilst there were a number of locations that Suzie probably didn't know about, there were three locations that she did know of that might suit the bill. If she added in Josiah's throwaway statement about having a secure laboratory nearby from the cafeteria, that narrowed it to one.

A twenty three cell location that had been converted to a warehouse, but been abandoned only partway through the conversion due to a lack of funds and interest. It wasn't technically a prison, but rather a training site for surviving enhanced interrogation. Also technically under the direct purview of the Signals Directorate, rather than one of the sister agencies, as what was being done could be construed as a crime if utilised by them directly.

She opened her eyes slowly, and smiled.

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Kim Nolan

They never told her what to do, there were no explicit instructions, but it was never unclear what they wanted her to do. Nobody threatened her, nobody placed a gun to her head. But she knew the threat was there.

She was handed a newspaper, as someone set up a camera on a tripod in front of her. Handwritten notes on large pieces of cardboard were held by someone else, and they began counting down to recording.

She never felt like she had a choice.

"The crimes that have been committed against our people are beyond evil." She stammered out, trying not to burst into tears, "It is for this reason that we have now been driven to respond in kind. We do not seek a ransom, but reparations for the wrongs that were done to us."

What the hell was this? Since when did kidnappers make terrorist demands? Since when the hell were there successful terrorist cells working inside Australian borders?

"Ten thousand, three hundred and sixty one men, women, and children, were massacred in the name of ever greater profits. In a single moment, they were erased from this world by a weapon of mass destruction." She spoke, but didn't understand it.

If someone had used a nuke or some virus or anything like that... Why hadn't she heard about it on the news? ... Was Suzie somehow involved?

"The Atlas weapon is a horrifying abomination that took the lives of innocents, leaving orphans and devastating entire families. For this reason, the creator of this weapon, Josiah McIntyre..." Her throat caught as she remembered how instinctively Suzie had hated him. If there was a weapon, then she would know. "Josiah McIntyre... Must pay. We will take his brothers from him. And he will pay for the suffering of his survivors."

Atlas meant nothing to her, but it sounded like a codename. Kim could imagine a weapon being designed under it. Josiah was a weapons designer. He could have made something experimental. It was possible that ten thousand deaths in some small country could be forgotten. Covered up in bribery. Wouldn't be the first time a tiny nation was used as a testing ground.

"For the release of Kim Nolan, we demand a paltry thirty million dollars. This will go to compensate those few who survived the devastation and cruelty of Josiah McIntyre's weapon." She stumbled over each



word, feeling like she was reeling. That if she made them have to take a second shot at the video in the next she would be bleeding.

“We have taken the engineer. We have killed the brother. We have no interest in another innocent death, and in this Kim Nolan is innocent, but evil begets evil. We will not forget, and we will not relent. Red Eagle.”

As she finished, they shut off the camera, took the newspaper, and left as soon as they had arrived.

Never having spoken to her once.

She felt her chest shaking as she realised she wasn't just a captive anymore. She was now a pawn on someone's chess board, being moved around, ready to be sacrificed for a play at the enemy queen.

Even she could tell that the demand for her release didn't sound right. It was too little, which probably meant they had no intention of ever handing her over. The only question that remained was if they intended to kill her before or after they sent the message out.

She bit her hand as she started to rock.

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John O'Connor

He looked at the tired and filthy man handcuffed to the table. His shirt was stained with blood, and the bags under his eyes suggested only fitful bouts of sleep. All in all, he looked like another victim being unjustly scrutinised.

O'Connor wished that he could believe it.

“I thought we agreed not to get in each other's way.” He said as he sat down across from him.

Josiah's head jerked up, as if he hadn't noticed him walk in, which was a lie. A practised liar, as most people who had to close sales were. As most people who had to keep national security secrets were.

“Have... Have they found them, yet?” He croaked.

O'Connor noticed the practice in the question, and the threading of the man's pulse. He might just be nervous. He clearly understood that he was a suspect in the situation, at the very least. "You and I have never got along very well, have we, Josiah?"

The man winced, "I guess.... O'Connor. Please. My brother was shot. Don't treat me like any other suspect. Tell me something. Is he even still alive? Is Kim okay? Suzie? I'll answer anything you want. I'm not going to fight you. Just... Something. Please."

"Stephen is in critical condition. The wound was through and through, but did a massive amount of damage. Right now, it's a coin flip if he survives." O'Connor gave him a tidbit, to watch the man's reaction. He saw relief there, which wouldn't be surprising either way.

He wasn't going to get very far just by studying the behaviour of the liar. He needed something more. Something concrete. "I assume you recognise the man with me, Agent Jack Bush."

Josiah shrugged, "I've seen you at the office a couple times. Sorry, Jack, was it? I... I never paid attention. Didn't even pay Suzie much attention... But she... Deserved it. Smartest person in the room. That's how I thought of myself, until I met her. Now... Now I'm nothing. Didn't see it coming. Don't know what to think. That's a new one for me."

A clear slant towards victimisation. It could possibly be true, but it suggested he didn't know who or why this was happening. The terrorist demand they'd just received, on the other hand, suggested that he should. That O'Connor had guessed right about what was on the wall before it was erased, and that the kidnappers themselves had put it there.

"I've been investigating you, Mr. McIntyre." Jack started slowly, leaning forward onto his elbows, "Have been for a while, actually. Would it shock you to learn that you are suspected of leaking classified information?"

"No. Because I have been." Josiah surprised the both of them, "I told you, I'm not going to fight you. If what I did put anyone in danger, if this is because of me, then throw me under the goddamn bus. Just save the girls."

Jack leaned back, "Any details to offer?"

“Atlas.” Josiah winced, “My cancelled project. It’s a weapon of mass destruction. Terrifying, powerful, and utterly reprehensible. But, the project got shelved. Too expensive, too terrifying. A breach of a dozen or more international treaties. It was always supposed to just be theoretical. I saw a damn movie, and made the damn thing work. That’s it. Except some bastard decided to try and build it. Suzie was the engineer brought in to fix it. She worked it out. Hated me for my part in it. Like I do.”

The Section Eight agent nodded slowly, “What information on Atlas have you leaked? And to which reporter?”

“Not a reporter. A senator.” Josiah replied, “Senator Phillip Davian. He’s an outspoken proponent of nuclear disarmament, and on a number of committees that meant he already had national security clearance. He seemed the obvious choice. I brought him proof, incontrovertible proof, that Atlas had not only been built, and deployed, but actually used, the day that his convoy was attacked.”

If all of this was a lie, it was a well formed one. It fit with the facts as O’Connor understood them, and was beginning to paint an extremely disturbing picture. It did however raise an obvious question. “Why did you try and get close to Susan Drakes?”

“Plant a bug on her.” Josiah shrugged, “Davian had tried earlier, and failed. Suzie was too good to be distracted like that. However, in a less formal setting, with more awkwardness, I thought it might be possible. And it was. I planted a tracker in her bag when I put away her clothes for her. Which probably led the bastards right to her.”

Jack decided to try and fake a rapport, “Actually, that one is on us. Operational failure. We found tracking software on Kim’s phone, installed recently. Probably during the failed attempt to take her captive earlier. Our agent was supposed to take the bait. However, we still should have taken her phone when she arrived at Alpha Sierra.”

Josiah smiled weakly, “At least I’m not to blame for one small thing. I tried to get close to Suzie Drakes, because I knew she made my mad idea work. It shouldn’t have. I left it incomplete on purpose. I don’t know what Suzie is. Intelligence field operative. Engineer. Analyst. All of the above. But she knew more about Atlas than anyone, myself included. I was hoping she was as scared of it as I was, and built in a way to shut

it down. That's what I wanted to talk to her about, why I wanted her away from Alpha Sierra, to talk about it. I don't have some mysterious project for her to work on. Someone built, and used, Atlas."

"You were hedging bets. Track her, stalk her, or convince her." Jack laid it out, "You are a piece of work, Josiah. So, tell us, do you think it was Davian who told Red Eagle Securities who killed their people with Atlas? Because they know. They've named you their target, and named the project as their glorious cause."

The man's shoulders slumped, and he looked at his handcuffed hands, "So it is on my hands, then. Kim. Stephen. Suzie."

"Davian's driver died, too." Jack pressed the advantage, but O'Connor wasn't as certain.

There was something about the confession, the admission of guilt, that wasn't ringing true. An acceptance of the blame, but no sign of seeking redemption. Everything he had said furthered his own aims, and for a whistleblower, he was being careful not to describe what Atlas actually did. There was no panic in what he was doing, only signs of a carefully thought out plan.

"I don't know what Davian did, if anything. My proof went up with his car." Josiah shrugged, "I mean, I made copies, but copies aren't proof. They're easier to discredit. I'm a part-owner in the world's largest weapons designer and manufacturer, my word won't take much to turn to mud. Maybe Davian did do something stupid. Might have asked the wrong questions to the wrong people. My plan all hinged on Suzie."

The first true thing the man had spoken since they started. When he said it all hinged on Suzie, there was a determination there, a strength of conviction that the rest of his words lacked.

They had the engineer.

He felt a chill as he suddenly realised why Suzie had been taken. It wasn't for revenge. It wasn't so that Atlas could possibly be disarmed.

They were planning on using it.

Jack stood up, "O'Connor, can I have a minute?"

## 5 Caging the Dragon

Suzie Drakes

She scratched at her chin and finished carefully tearing the plans in front of her, and begin repositioning each component that she had been given to analyse. Whatever idiot thought that burying the problem in a different plan and expecting her not to put it together had severely underestimated not just her memory, but her.

It was child's play.

She finished putting together the actual pieces and shoved the rest of the plans onto the floor, and looked at it with an existential dread as she realised what kind of choice she was being asked to make.

Not again.

She couldn't lose anyone. Couldn't. She couldn't choose between watching Kim die, and watching the world burn because she was a selfish prat.

It was the firing sequencer for Atlas.

Her firing sequencer.

She wished that she still knew how to cry on demand. Right now, she wanted to do like Kim, cry and curl up in a corner and pretend that the world was nice enough to fix itself just for her.

She hated that she knew that nothing would happen that she did not make happen. There was no one who could save her, but herself. There was no one coming to intervene in some miraculous way. Deus ex machina was the hope of a blind fool.

She hadn't built a backdoor into Atlas when she had worked on it, but she hadn't left it intact, either. If any backdoor exists, eventually, someone, somewhere, would find it. A backdoor was as good as making a glass window so you can see into the vault. Eventually someone is going through the window to steal everything. All you've done is tempt them.

What she had done, was the firing sequencer. It would work, and the circuit could stand up to most scrutiny. However, it would only work once. After that, you'd have a multi-million dollar project floating around uselessly in space. It would never fire again. It would self-destruct

the moment you used it. The circuits would cascade fail, burning out and effecting any other circuits around them. The physical latches would snap and lock closed. Even the silicon substrate would warp, and the layers begin to separate.

If she was right... Then someone had used it. And Atlas had broken, as she intended.

Now, she was a prisoner, and someone wanted her to build a new firing sequencer, one that wouldn't self destruct. Meaning that they thought they could either build a deploy something like Atlas without being noticed, unlikely, or that they could send up a repair team to the original and not just fix it, but hijack it.

She felt her stomach twisting into knots at the thought.

She had lived her life trying to avoid the pain from when she'd lost her family. Every single thing she did, the very way she viewed the world, revolved around her trying to control the uncontrollable in a desperate attempt to never feel that helpless agony ever again.

Now, here she was.

The world, or the only friend she had.

She walked over and tapped on the grate where she knew the camera was watching her. She would play the role that she had been given, and she would fuck them all for putting her in this position. She would make them regret ever trying to have controlled her.

O'Connor had given her the codename Dragon, not just as a reference to her last name, because that would be stupid. He called her the Dragon because every single person who tried to manipulate her always ended up burned.

She was going to burn them all alive.

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Kim Nolan

She stared at the food on the tin plate, feeling queasy. It wasn't that it was completely unappetising. It was pretty hard to screw up plain porridge. It just reminded her of her last meal.

Laughing with the others, eating pizza and playfully teasing the man who had shot her boyfriend right in front of her. He had smiled in embarrassment, and she hadn't seen it. Hadn't seen the cruel edge to him. He was a monster, and she had been thinking he wasn't half as bad as Stephen acted like he might be.

Suzie had been on her laptop, putting together an email or something, with a promise that once she was done that they were going to watch a movie. Kim couldn't even remember the title. She didn't know why that upset her, but it did. Everything mattered, now.

The pizza had been a meatlovers, to satisfy the boys. She would have been happy with just about anything. It was just an excuse to hang out as a group. She and Stephen had broken through their barrier, and he was more than happy to hold and hug her in front of everyone.

However, she had been concerned that the chess match might have transformed both Josiah and Suzie into insufferable pricks. The last time that Kim had seen Suzie lose at a game of strategy had been when they were children, and it had not gone down all that well.

It had been one of their weekend games. Whenever Suzie felt frustrated and alone, that she didn't have an intellectual equal anymore, the two of them had headed down to one of the local parks. Suzie then challenged every single free chess player at once, skipping between them to prove her prowess, and to feel like she actually had something to overcome.

Kim had always found it boring, but did it for her friend. She used to sit on a bench or swing, tearing up leaves and kicking idly. That time that Suzie had lost, she had heard a scream of frustration and saw the young girl kick over a chair, right before she intimidated the old man into detailing his plan, step by step.

Kim had been terrified that Suzie was going to make him have a heart attack, and had tried to get her to leave. Her friend would have none of it, not satisfied in leaving until she understood exactly how she had been manipulated, so that it would never happen again.

Suzie acted as calm and collected as you could expect, but the girl had a temper on her, and the wit to go with it. As much as Suzie promised Kim she was going to get her out of this, she really hoped that it didn't happen that way. She hoped that it was her boss, or Stephen paying the ransom, or something like that, that saved her.

Otherwise it wouldn't be Suzie standing there anymore.

Just an angel of vengeance.

If that happened... Kim didn't see Suzie ever coming back to her.

She'd walked down this particular road once before, and she didn't like the ending. It wasn't something she thought about often, but she still remembered those first few months after the accident.

She'd thought it was the ICU, the tubes and cords, that had transformed Suzie from a laughing and giggling girl into a silent and brooding shadow that could bring the whole room down with a silent look.

Except, when Suzie had begun to move on, learning how to walk, she still hadn't spoken a single word. She didn't smile, or laugh. She didn't cry. Suzie was nothing but an empty shell. Going through the motions.

Kim had nightmares at the time, that her friend had become a zombie, and what had come back wasn't what went in. It had worried her parents and school, to the point where she was going to a child psychologist, who suggested that the healthiest thing for her to do was to break off her friendship. When she'd responded in anger to that, the psych had diagnosed her with some sort of anger problem, and prescribed extra therapy for it.

She had hated her parents for a long time for buying that.

Kim ate her food slowly as she cried, remembering how long she had struggled beside the empty ghost of her friend. The silent lunches, as they sat beside the basketball court. The stiff and one-way hugs she had given Suzie everyday to say goodbye.

It had completely shocked her when the shell suddenly broke. Kim had been gushing over one of the basketballers, who she had a crush on, but not the confidence to act on. Suzie, for the first time since the accident, had suddenly spoken, "You know, you should ask him out."



He'd ended up rejecting her, but Suzie had just suddenly become alive again. Not the same girl as before. More confident, and with a sliver of dangerous lying beneath the surface. It was a bittersweet memory, but one of Kim's most prized possessions.

It wasn't even a gradual thing. From that moment onwards, Suzie smiled and laughed. She snored in class and talked back to the teacher, correcting them as they tried to teach an outdated curriculum that didn't reflect reality. She seemed like a normal girl again.

Well... Almost normal. Suzie had never quite fit that label. An introverted nerd who could beat down the most savage of bullies without batting an eye wasn't someone without their problems. And most teenage girls didn't spend their weekends re-designing their prosthetic arm. Or idolise weapons designers.

There was a thought she hadn't got around to, yet.

Josiah had been Suzie's hero. Just another bitter illustration that one should never meet their heroes, though usually that just meant they were a jerk or disappointment, and not a crazy crackpot working with a bunch of terrorists.

"Done?"

She flinched at the guard she hadn't heard come in, and then nodded. He took the tin plate, and then paused, "You don't have to be so worried, you know. No one here is going to hurt you. You'll be out of here, soon enough."

"I should totally trust the assholes who kidnapped me and issued an ultimatum." She said bitterly, "If niceness is what you're going for, your brand could use an overhaul."

He laughed and leaned on the wall, "I suppose no one has really talked to you, have they? We're just waiting on Josiah to get back. We're doing the right thing, here. Protecting lives. We're going to let you go. If you need anything, for the rest of your life, McIntyre will be there to provide it."

"You know how you sound, right?" Her confidence cracked as she tried to seem tougher than she was feeling.

He shrugged, "Probably. It's... Hard. It was a hard choice to make, but needed to be made. Your friend, Susan... She built Atlas. I've seen what it did. The people it killed. I'm sure she didn't know what she was doing, but it had to be stopped. Has to stop. We can't let it ever be used again."

"So... Suzie is Einstein?" She shrugged, "His greatest regret was splitting the atom. What was hers? Finding a way to create an artificial black hole?"

"Building a clock." He smiled sadly, "A clock designed to kill people en mass. Do you even know what your friend's job is? She's not a bodyguard, that's just what the media get told. She's the intelligence community's public face, apparently a diversity hire, but she's not. She's their problem solver."

"Suzie is Suzie. That's all that matters to me. And if you can't see that, then you're going to end up getting hurt." Kim shook her head, "You've made her mad. That was a mistake."

"Before this is all over, I assure you, Suzie will be working with us, not against." He said with a calm conviction that gave her chills. The guard leaned off the wall, "I should get going. Do you want something to pass the time? Pack of cards? Board game?"

She shrugged, feeling hollow.

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John O'Connor

"They're going to try and use Atlas." O'Connor winced, and shook his head, "Is it... Possible? Is it hackable? If they have Suzie?"

"No." Jack said with conviction and shook his head, "I'm well aware that you know more about Atlas than you should, O'Connor. But what your little dragon never told you was that she sabotaged it. It's broken. Three billion dollars of space junk, that's almost due to deorbit. It is being decommissioned, which is probably why there is such a timetable on these fucks."

"She told me. I approved the plan, actually." He replied, "If you're going to arrest me for that, go right ahead. After we get her back. Suzie won't be sitting still. She won't be assuming that we're coming to get her, Wild. She'll be making trouble."

"Josiah gave us something to work with. The tracker." Jack replied, "Now, I have Suzie's bag in evidence, and we've gone over it a few times. There is no sign of a tracker. So either she already found it and ditched it, or she took it with her when they grabbed her. Worth a shot."

O'Connor frowned, "I don't want to ask McIntyre for details. I still think he's playing us somehow. I assume you think you can find this tracker, without his help?"

"Absolutely. I agree. And it's already done." Jack replied, "We tracked the signal to a location outside Alpha Sierra, about twenty minutes away. We recovered Suzie's artificial arm there, about ten minutes ago."

He sighed heavily, "You hadn't made up your mind if you were going to tell me, yet."

"No. I still don't know if you can be trusted, O'Connor. You tend to act with impunity, and without conscience. Your job is to use people. My job is to make sure that people don't get used by the wrong kind of people. You're a threat to the security of this nation, even if you're doing your job correctly." Jack said firmly, "But there is something else you can help me with. I will focus on getting your agent back. For you, I want you to find Ted McIntyre, who has a half dozen other aliases. He's fallen off the grid."

"Red Eagle's video suggested they thought Stephen was dead, but they still promised to hunt the brother." O'Connor agreed, "Which is why he's in my protective custody. Surprised you didn't know, actually. I issued protective orders for the entire McIntyre family shortly after you called me to tell me Suzie had been taken. You didn't mention how you knew that, though."

"Section Eight was actively tracking your agent." Jack brushed it off, "What kind of protective detail? I haven't come across it, yet. You got more secrets, Section Chief?"

“Always.” O’Connor answered honestly, “Since I had thought that you might be a mole, I took steps to move the chain of custody outside the agency. Ted is in an off-grid private bunker, without a single government employee around. Private security. Nothing unusual, considering that Stephen was officially killed.”

“And you’re not planning to tell me where. I could pull rank, O’Connor.”

He shrugged, “That’s fine. Because I don’t know where he is. That was the point of doing it that way. He is under his own authority. Feel free to issue a BOLO.”

The agent wasn’t impressed, but neither of them did trust the other. There were still too many unanswered questions, like how even a well trained organisation knew enough to pierce the security of one of the most secure military bases in the country.

“You going to tell me where you found the prosthetic?” He asked.

Jack shrugged, “Fine. Sure. I’ll send you the full report, and even the arm. Maybe she hooked it up to respond to you, like the laptop. Suzie does seem to trust you for some damn reason that I can’t figure out.”

“Because I have her back, Wild. I will always have her back.” O’Connor said firmly.

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Suzie Drakes

She didn’t look up from the work desk as the guard entered, “You asked for something to draw with? I brought some pencils, and a ruler. Also some food.”

She waved behind beside her, seemingly distracted, “Just leave it there.”

He placed the things beside her, and looked at what she was doing, “So you worked it then -”

He would have kept speaking if two hundred and forty volts hadn't ripped through him the moment he placed a hand on the desk. Instead he was knocked backwards and into convulsions. She grabbed a pencil as it fell deftly, spinning it in her hand before stepping over and driving it through his eye and into his brain in a smooth motion, as her knee held him down.

Suzie stood up, flicking the pencil between her pinky fingers as she extracted the keys from his belt and walked over to the door, leaving the wiring from the intercom connected to the two small nails poking up through the desk.

She unlocked her door and opened it to face the guard who would be waiting on the other side. He went to say something in surprise as he saw her there, opening his mouth wide enough for her to drive the pencil through the soft palate of his upper mouth.

He dropped, twitching, to the ground as she freed his gun from its holster. She flicked the safety off and cocked it with her teeth, before proceeding down the hallway.

She couldn't afford to feel anything, not yet. She had never had to kill before, but she had no advantages in this situation. They had her arm, leaving her unbalanced and weak. They had her friend, leaving her with a visible vulnerability.

Suzie stepped quietly against the wall as she saw two more guards turning into the hallway. They didn't see her, walking in the other direction. She followed as silently as she could, matching their footsteps.

One was tossing a deck of playing cards, talking about how innocent the prisoner seemed. That he knew that she would be proud of them one day, when she finally understood what they were trying to do.

Suzie waited until they turned to open Kim's door. She knew they would spot her then, out of their peripheral. So she shot one twice in centre mass, the gunfire echoing out like a cannon in the hallways, before she whipped the other in the knee, bringing him down so she could grab and break his neck in a swift movement.

She safetied her gun and tucked it into her dress before dragging both men to the side of the door, where hopefully she could avoid Kim

seeing them too well. She scavenged another clip of ammo from them and unlocked the steel door, dragging it open. "Time to go."

Kim stared up at her in shock and surprise, and Suzie smiled arrogantly, "I'd love to hear how amazing I am, but we're on the clock. Let's move it."

Her friend sprang to her feet and stumbled in behind her, as they began moving down the hallway again. She wished she could reassure her, but Suzie was worried about the gunfire. If it were her, alarms would be blaring and orders would be being shouted into microphones. Men with guns and more than one hand would be on their way.

"Suzie." A voice crackled over the intercom, "Is this really how you want to die? Do you even know where you are?"

Her stomach dropped as she recognised the voice, and it wasn't who she had expected to hear. Another piece of the puzzle slotting into place. She couldn't see the whole picture yet. Something was still eluding her, but now she knew that they had to leave, and now.

Kim swallowed nervously, "Is that -"

"Ssh." Suzie gestured, and then pushed Kim up beside a wall. She stalked up to the corner on her own, gun still put away. Instead she had the ring of keys spread out through her fingers.

She rounded the corner and blocked the mouth of the guard before he could shout. Her fist slammed quickly and repeatedly into his face, before she whirled to place an elbow into his partner and cut him off before his frightened response could call out to anyone else.

These weren't heartless professional soldiers. They were nothing but security guards. People who had never had to fight for their lives before. Who didn't understand the violence that was necessary to drag yourself from the burning wreck.

She waved to Kim, who was pale as a ghost, barely walking. Her friend leaned on the wall as she tried to keep up, and keep from throwing up. That was to be expected. Suzie would join her, just as soon as she got them out of the facility.

"I can see you, Suzie. Every move you make. What exactly are you expecting to accomplish?" The voice continued over the loudspeaker,

"I could lock this entire building down with a single keystroke. Is this really what you want? To die in some useless attempt to escape? Have you even worked out why I felt the need to do this? To do it this way?"

She didn't know why he had done it, but she understood why. She wasn't about to listen to anything he had to say. He was a traitor, a tyrant, and a sociopath. His goals might be mysterious to her right now, but his methods wouldn't be.

In a moment he would send in his partners, the hired scapegoat of Red Eagle Securities, and then they'd be right fucked.

It was possible that he was watching her every move by security camera, but she doubted it. She wouldn't be able to surprise the guards if that were the case. Instead he had cameras in a few choice locations, hooked up to some wireless network. A makeshift security grid, nothing more, because this place was a last minute improvisation. He'd never intended to bring them here.

Suzie untucked her gun as she heard the heavy footfalls of armed and prepared military feet from the intersection ahead of them. She signalled to Kim to lie down, and then told her to block her ears with a symbol. Her friend ducked her head and plastered her hands over her ears.

She wished she had her own ear protection.

There was at least four, with semi-automatic weapons, cocked and ready. They knew her rough location, but were waiting for her to present a target. It'd be a perfect nest for a grenade, but she could keep dreaming on that front. It would take two long to circle around.

Instead she had to rely on instinct, memory, and training. The average human reaction time was anywhere up to three hundred milliseconds for a target that appeared. If you had a fixed and expected point, that could drop down to a hundred. They had to react to her, she could fire based on an assumption.

Had to.

Suzie fired twice as she stepped into the hallway, the gun cracking backwards into her hand as it blinded her hearing. The third shot missed the mark as the soldier tried to turn towards her, and she fired at the fourth.

A bullet hit her shoulder, jerking her around so her fourth shot slammed through their head instead of chest. She killed the last and dropped her empty magazine to the ground, whistling in pain and astonished by her luck. She reloaded, and stepped over to a groaning soldier and ended them.

She had aimed where she'd expected their heads to be, rightly hypothesising that they would be wearing body armour. She stripped off two jackets, dragging them back to Kim.

Her friend's hands were frantic as she helped them both into them. Suzie smiled at her gently, "I told you, I'm getting you out of this. You're going to be okay."

"What... The fuck... Are you?"

Suzie helped her to her feet, and checked her weapon before moving down the last hallway to the exit, "What I've always been, Kim. A survivor."

— — —

Kim Nolan

She had no idea how Suzie knew where she was going when they emerged out and into the open air. She had no idea how Suzie could act like a death machine from the future as she blew people away like they weren't living things.

People didn't die quickly.

The sound of a death rattle was going to stick in Kim's ringing ears for an eternity. She was never going to get over any of this. She was right on the edge of breaking down and retreating from this reality to one made of pink unicorns.

Suzie wrapped her hand in a stolen shirt and shattered the window of a car, unlocking it and brushing down the seat before stepping in. She unlocked the door, and Kim climbed in nervously across from her.

She should have been unsurprised that Suzie could trivially bypass a car alarm and ignition, but it still did. She probably should have been



unsurprised that her friend could fucking murder people, she'd been trained at the military base. It wasn't like they were teaching her how to cuddle plushies.

Suzie reversed the car, spinning it out onto the nearby dirt track and the jeep roared along, far louder than any car needed to be. The impassive face of the machine finally melted, and Kim saw a tear glisten in her eyes, threatening to spill over and run down her cheeks.

"Are you... Okay?"

Suzie rolled her eyes, "That's a dumb question. I'm not fine, but right now I need to focus on driving. Not like we're out of the woods just yet."

Kim nodded and double-checked her seatbelt, before sinking into the chair. She wanted to scream and shout and cry, but she didn't want to distract Suzie, either. The both of them were about to break.

The bastard that had kidnapped them was going to pay. He had no idea what he was doing when he tried to lock up Suzie Drakes. He'd picked a fight with someone who was a very poor loser, and had more wit than any one person deserved to have.

Trying to get angry wasn't making her feel any better.

Kim sat up suddenly and urgently signalled the window to go down. It barely cleared in time as she puked out and into the wind. Her stomach rolled and heaved, as she begged it to stop, feeling the muscles contract and tear. Still, she coughed and felt the acid burn her nose.

She leaned heaving on the windowsill long after it had stopped, eyes closed as she listened to the whistling of the wind. Gentle tears were plucked from her face, sailing away as she tried to understand if she were alive or some floating phantom.

None of this felt real.

It felt like it should feel... Worse.

She'd just watched her friend kill more than a dozen people without hesitation. Kim sat up weakly and glanced over at Suzie. Her eyes widened as she saw the woman struggling to keep her eyes open and she grabbed the wheel, pushing Suzie back into her seat, "Oh fuck. Oh fuck. You're hurt."

"We'll be fine in a minute." Suzie said through gritted teeth, nodding at the road ahead, "Can't afford to stop. Alpha Sierra is ten minutes down the road."

"Tell me what to do." Kim ordered.

Suzie sighed, "Keep holding the wheel. And don't flinch."

Then her friend reached down and pushed in the cigarette lighter. Kim locked her eyes on the road ahead, trying not to be distracted as she realised what Suzie was about to do.

Her friend didn't even groan when she burned herself. Kim heard the sizzle and smelled the disturbingly tasty scent, but Suzie barely reacted at all. Her hand went back onto the wheel, "Thanks."

Kim leaned back into her seat, keeping an eye on her, "Where... You really are military."

"I don't want to talk about this right now." Suzie said stiffly, "Because if I do, I'm going to burst into tears and crash the car. Right now, let's get you somewhere safe."

She really hoped that safe didn't mean the military base. She also didn't know if she'd ever feel safe again, not after what she had witnessed. Her boyfriend had been shot, right in front of her. Her best friend had killed people, right in front of her.

Safe might be the land of pixies that crazy people retreated inside, and nothing else.

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John O'Connor

He rushed out of the tent, throwing it aside as he saw the jeep pulling into the parking lot. He stared in shock as Suzie climbed out of the driver's seat, and then he saw her knees shaking and ran over.

His feet slammed against the packed dirt as he raced over to his agent. A broken young girl that he had put in the firing line without

hesitation, time and time again. He was still surprised she was in one piece.

Suzie glared at him, stopping him, “Don’t you dare hug me.”

He looked over as Kim fell to her knees, and he shook his head, “Holy shit, Suzie. Holy shit.”

“She needs a psych. I need a medic.” Suzie replied, shrugging out of a bulletproof vest and revealing a shirt that was more bloodstain than it was white.

A support team was already on the way, considering what had greeted them at the gate. He shook his head, “You know, I was almost ready to send in a squad to retrieve you. We had you on satellite when you decided to leave.”

“Got bored of waiting.” Suzie teased, but he could hear the accusation in her voice. She wasn’t wrong. She was supposed to be safe here, and she wasn’t.

“Josiah is in handcuffs, if you need to have a conversation.”

She leaned against the car, wincing as a medic examined her, “Bullet is still lodged. Lost a lot of blood, hang two bags. You got what you need?”

“Not yet.” Suzie seethed and then winced, “Not just him. Ted was running the site. Those two were working together, boss.”

He nodded grimly, “Okay. I’ll see you after surgery. And I’m sending someone with you.”

He flicked a hand, ordering one of his agents. The nurse wasn’t pleased, but there was nothing that they could do about it. From now on, he wasn’t letting Suzie out of his sights.

He walked around and helped Kim to her feet, smiling at the fragile girl, “Good to see you’re in one piece.”

“I’m not. I am in no way fucking fine.” The graphic designer shook her head.

He smiled at her, “That’s a good sign. As crap as that sounds. Thomson, Veronique. You know what’ll happen to you if she gets so much as a scratch?”

The two agents closed ranks, and O'Connor smiled at her again, "Have a shower. Catch your breath, and then we'll take you to see Stephen. Okay?"

She nodded weakly as she was led away.

Jack stepped up beside him, smoking a cigarette, "Well. You were right. Suzie doesn't stay put, does she? Anything I need to know?"

"The facility. You taken it yet?"

Jack nodded slowly, "Moved in. Lot of dead bodies, O'Connor. Suzie hasn't seen combat before, has she? Because she has now."

O'Connor turned to him, "Did you find Ted McIntyre?"

"Aw, shit." The Section Eight operative swore, "He was on site? Well, no. We haven't. I am tracking three vehicles that left the scene, but they were hanging back. Seeing where this leads us."

"Take 'em out." O'Connor replied, "This is in my jurisdiction right now. Don't fight me on this. You take those vehicles, and drag the prisoners here. Where you can assist me in ripping them to pieces."

Jack nodded slowly, and tapped his earpiece, "You have a go."

O'Connor took a deep breath, "If both Ted and Josiah were in on this... It is a family business."

"I know." Jack said grimly, "But Stephen is barely breathing through a tube. He isn't capable of running, and we have guards posted. He's in a military hospital, he isn't sneaking out."

"Double the guard, anyway." O'Connor ordered, "Because Suzie just triggered whatever failsafe those fuckers put in place. And I would be in no way surprised if that means the investors will try and clean house."

Jack nodded, "Agreed. We need to talk to Suzie as soon as we can, boss."

"She's in surgery. Markham is with her." O'Connor replied, and shook his head, "What the hell do you know about McIntyre that I don't, Wild? Since when have they got connections to South African lithium mines? And the warlords to go with them?"

"Technically we don't call them warlords anymore. They're corrupt businessmen who hire private armies." Jack avoided the question, and then shrugged, "But as for Atlas being used to quell an uprising? It was

news to me. I've asked the right people the right questions. Now, no one is talking to me."

O'Connor shook his head, "Never should have loaned her out. Suzie is just a kid. She might have done basic, but she was not a soldier. She was our specialist. Her military training was supposed to be for emergencies, not..."

"Don't go imploding on me yet, sir." Jack cautioned him, "She got herself out. Now, we have to put her back together. That's going to take longer. And whilst we're doing that, we need to make sure it never happens again. Ever."

O'Connor couldn't agree more.

Whoever had orchestrated this little play was going into a dark hole for the rest of eternity.



## 6 Staring Into the Abyss

Suzie Drakes

She saw O'Connor walking over as the nurse anxiously talked to him in hushed whispers. Like that mattered, she could read their lips, and it was as predictable as hell. She'd refused a sedative, and they were asking him if they could do it anyway. Put her under some kind of psych hold.

Suzie finished picking the handcuff keeping her on the bed, and walked over to him. "We should debrief."

He sighed heavily, and nodded, "Yeah. I've got a command centre set up."

They walked in silence, but she could feel a shift in him. He wasn't the mysterious and suave figure that he usually was. She had known he had operated in battle zones and under fire before. She had a feeling that the soldier inside him was threatening to make an appearance, and everyone was going to regret it if it did.

O'Connor ducked into the tent, and sat down at his desk.

She sat down across from him, and took a deep breath, feeling the memories sort and flash in front of her. She glanced at the tent flap, and then stared at her feet. "Josiah shot Stephen. Right in front of us. Unprovoked, as far as I can tell. Didn't see any obvious signal. He had a phone, but I saw no signs of any notification from it. We were mid-conversation about terrible zombie films."

O'Connor nodded slowly, "Then what happened."

"He punched Kim, knocking her down, and grabbed me by my hair. Dragged me down and threatened Kim. I couldn't see a way to disarm him before he could either kill or significantly harm her. I complied." Suzie winced, "Then, he drew a circle on the wall in Stephen's blood. Spelled out Atlas inside it. Whilst he was occupied, I took the tracker Josiah planted in my bag earlier."

"We found your arm." O'Connor nodded, "Techs are looking it over before I return it. Don't want anymore surprises. Everything happens by the book, now."

"I'm too tired to argue." Suzie smiled at him, reassuring him. "Josiah met a team in the hallway, dressed in army fatigues, but they weren't recruits. Felt like mercenaries. Military postures, but not the discipline. They escorted me to the fence line, and then drugged me."

He winced, "Your reputation proceeds you. Go on."

"Noticed a few things about the mercs." Suzie halted him, "Two of them shared a tattoo, at least that I could see. An anchor with a human eye, positioned over a sphere. Possibly a rendition of the world. One had a European accent. Weaponry was outdated. Steyr-AUGs."

O'Connor smiled softly, "Faces?"

"I'll work with an artist later. But right now, it won't help. And I just want this over and done with." She shook her head, "Woke up in a facility. Steel door. Determined it was one of our off-grid torture endurance training places. Bad set up. Like they rushed it. Used the intercom to try and cheer up Kim, and then used it to shock the guard bringing me food later. Tried to look like I was playing along until then. Layout was the same as the place where I was taught, for the most part. I'm sure you've got a report on who died and how by now."

"Mm." He nodded grimly, "Pencil. Keys. You certainly improvised."

"Did what had to be done." Suzie growled, daring him to criticise her. Except she didn't see anything but concern in his eyes, and it was beginning to piss her off. There was nothing she hated in the world more than sympathy.

"Drove here. Cauterised the bullet wound with a cigarette lighter." She shrugged, "Never saw Ted. When we were escaping, he spoke over the intercom. Asked me if I even knew why he felt the need to do what he was. I don't. Don't have all the pieces."

"You've had a rough time." O'Connor sighed heavily, "Here's what I have. Jack Bush, our very own Agent Wild, is Section Eight. Planted to investigate my very own self. Probably you, as well. Neither Section Eight, nor my boss, are willing to talk about whether someone actually built Atlas. But it seems like the hit team that attacked your beach house were survivors of an attack."

"Not possible." Suzie shook her head, "If someone really did build it, you're not going to get survivors, sir. Atlas wasn't a Rod of God."



It didn't drop some massive thing from space and hope to hit the target. That was the original design, and it stank. Atlas was designed for sustained bombardment. Several hundred thousand depleted uranium shells dropped from LEO over just a few kilometres. It'd be a firestorm. To survive that, you would have to be one lucky son of a bitch."

O'Connor frowned, "So what do you think this is?"

"I reckon someone knew I designed a flaw into it. I think they wanted to fix the flaw. And I think that the timeline is because they almost have a window to launch it." Suzie grimaced.

O'Connor shrugged, "Jack has provided me with the report that Atlas was used. It's redacted to hell, but... It doesn't seem to talk about a bombardment of any scale. It looks based on the prototype."

"Which could never fly. Getting the payload up into space would take more than the shuttles we currently have available are capable of." Suzie shrugged, "Someone's bullshitting us."

"Atlas is a smokescreen. It is possible that the project isn't involved at all. What did they try and have you work on?" O'Connor asked cautiously.

Suzie shrugged, not getting it, "The firing sequencer for Atlas."

He drummed his fingers on the table, "The components for that... Ever used them in anything else, before? Any part of it?"

"I guess." Suzie shrugged, "The sensors were all based on my nerve conduction stuff, to make the circuits smaller and lighter. The armature used some of my ideas around nanotubes, to make it more lightweight. The substrate used a faster etching process I threw together for prototyping. I reuse everything I do."

"They made an excuse to take your arm, before dumping it in the desert. I need you to tell me what's missing." O'Connor said quickly.

She rubbed her temples, and then agreed tiredly.

She just wanted to sleep for a week.

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Kim Nolan

She didn't know why she had expected them to fly Stephen out, but she hadn't expected to sit down beside him without leaving Alpha Sierra. He looked in a bad way, but she was assured that he would survive.

Speaking was another thing altogether. They were confident that he would get care unavailable to the rest of the world, being the sole family member not about to be charged with terrorism-related crimes, making him the owner of McIntyre Industries, and even more absurdly rich than he already was. It still wasn't comforting.

However, sitting beside him, she could remember his nervous enthusiasm. The way he smiled at her, the way he'd turned her head and kissed her to get her attention earlier.

The way he had smoothly greeted Suzie and treated her like just another woman, instead of freaking out, especially after she immediately launched into security procedures with him.

Stephen wasn't just another guy to her. She wasn't particularly comfortable with his day job, but she didn't care enough to let it bother her. He was still the nice guy she'd somehow fluked into meeting at a hotel bar.

Kim looked sadly at the hand she was holding, considering everything that had brought her to this position. How in the hell had wanting to go on a beach trip to get her boyfriend to open a bit descended into multiple kidnapping attempts, and the utter destruction of her friend?

She jerked as she felt a firm hand squeeze her shoulder, and looked up to see Suzie, or a piece of her. Her friend had her usual face, but the sad smile wasn't reaching her eyes anymore. Something had broken in Suzie, and it was beginning to scare her.

"You got another arm?"

"Backup." Suzie nodded, "They fetched it from home. Didn't want to risk... Let's not talk about that stuff. Let's talk about what you're going to do once he's up and about."

Kim winced and shook her head, "Rehab takes a long time. He won't be able to talk. Even if he recovers, it'll take a while. Remember learning to walk?"

Suzie sat down beside her, arm going around her in a hug, “I remember my personal cheer squad. How did that song go again? Yes! Yes! She can do it! She’s going to kick your ass!”

Kim smiled with embarrassment as she remembered bouncing around whilst Suzie stumbled on two horizontal bars and glared daggers at her. “Looking back, I kind of thought you hated it.”

“I did. At least at first.” Suzie smiled, “But... Looking back... It kept me going, all the same. That was all you, Kim. The doctors might have managed to pull my body out of hell, but you found my soul. Not saying you can pull off two miracles in your lifetime... But I wouldn’t be here without you. Wouldn’t have ever woken up. Probably be some drone programmer in the back of some crappy web shop where the aircon hasn’t worked in a decade.”

Kim giggled at the image, “You would definitely be wearing glasses, too.”

“And a ponytail.” Suzie continued.

She smiled sadly, and then looked at him, “I don’t know, Suzie. I don’t even know if he’s still going to want me in his life after this. We barely knew each other. I’m going to be a constant reminder of... This.”

“So is his home.” Suzie replied gently, “His own brother shot him. He doesn’t have a home to go back to. Doesn’t have a workplace. Doesn’t have a family. He’s lost everything in the trauma. He’s going to need something to keep him solid, even if it’s just someone willing to slap him every now and then when he forgets he needs to be a little bit selfish to get through. Someone to slow him down, bring him back down to earth.”

Kim knew she was speaking from experience, but she didn’t know if it was the same. Suzie had been in an accident, she hadn’t been betrayed by her closest family. She’d... She had been betrayed. By the world itself. That was why Suzie was always so paranoid.

Kim felt like she finally understood a little better.

“Besides, Kim, since when have you ever let a guy just push you away?” Suzie raised an eyebrow at her, “I mean, generally you date jerks, but you don’t exactly let them ghost you. You’re not subtle enough to take that lying down.”

Kim rolled her eyes, "I was supposed to be lying down. All weekend. Bloody hell. What happened?"

"Well, you probably didn't date a jerk this time. Instead... That was kinda me." Suzie said sheepishly.

Kim glanced at her in surprise, "Huh?"

"I spent the entire weekend flirting with Josiah, who has turned out to be not just a jerk, but the biggest jerk in the whole damn world." Suzie shrugged.

Kim scratched her head in confusion, "Are you telling me... You actually liked him? Seriously? I thought things were a disaster between the two of you. Before he turned around and shot his brother."

Suzie made a small coy smile, "I... I really liked him, Kim. Pretending to be confident as a distraction to be able to flip the couch wasn't just... I could have just decked him in a dive. I liked playing with him. I finally found someone who could see... Me. See passed all my quirks and quirky quirks and smile. Too bad he was the massive terroristic asshole of a jerk. Who arranged for me to be kidnapped. And threatened and you. And shot his brother."

Kim breathed out slowly, shaking her head, "Wow... And I thought I had bad taste."

The two laughed nervously, grinning at each other.

It felt nice to be able to talk about something normal again. She needed that, a slice of normal. It felt good to be able to gush over a guy with her introverted friend, instead of feeling like someone had a sniper rifle permanently trained right between her eyes.

"So... If you ever come up with a double date again..."

Kim frowned, "Really? You'd come just to help me out?"

"What?" Suzie stared at her, "No, I was about to say you can shove it up your ass."

Kim laughed at her, and punched her softly, "Yeah, yeah. But at least you got to meet all the McIntyres. That's like a childhood dream, right?"

"I guess it is. All my childhood dreams were nightmares." Suzie nodded along, and Kim felt the forced humour beginning to crack through.

She leaned onto her, hugging her, “I’m... I’m okay. I don’t know how or why. But for now... I’m okay.”

“Being burned takes a while.” Suzie whispered quietly, “It doesn’t always hurt. It doesn’t to start with. Being just okay... That’s the goal.”

Kim nodded, “Aha. Reminding yourself?”

“Yep.” Suzie said grimly, and then eased herself up, pushing Kim away. “I’ll be back in a minute. Hang a sock on the door or something if he wakes up.”

Kim rolled her eyes.

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John O’Connor

“The moment you finish your reports, you’re on leave. For now, you’re on administrative leave. What the heck are you doing here, Suzie?” O’Connor asked as he entered his tent and saw the woman sifting through a whirl of papers surrounding her in a circle.

“Research. Confirmation of an idea.” She said grimly, and then picked up a report, “Got it! These are Wild’s reports on the McIntyres. He was tailing them on and off, gathering intel to see if they were corrupt. Could be continued to be trusted with the high level of security clearance the company enjoyed.”

O’Connor crouched beside her, “Fine, I’ll hear you out. Sounds like you got something we missed.”

“When is it hardest to keep a secret between three people?” Suzie asked.

He shrugged, “When there’s more than two people involved. What are you getting at, Suzie?”

“Stephen was shot to shut him up. Taking out his throat and not his skull wasn’t just to give him a chance to survive. It was a message. Not to talk.” Suzie replied grimly and handed him the report.

He skimmed over it, “Stephen McIntyre broke from his regular schedule, and began regularly hanging out at a hotel bar. Maybe he was looking for a prostitute. Maybe he was meeting a business contact. What of it?”

“He was looking for Kim. He wasn’t regularly hanging out at the hotel bar. He missed it three times, and they line up with times that Kim had to reschedule with her client. It wasn’t an accident, those two ending up together.” Suzie insisted.

If it was anyone else, he would have called this fishing. Except he knew that Suzie wouldn’t want to go looking for this kind of evidence. She wouldn’t want to hurt her friend like that. “Anything more?”

“Kim arranged the beach house because she couldn’t get close to Stephen. He was always cold. Hesitating to even hold hands. But still saying all the rights things.” Suzie stated and then winced, “I’d say he wasn’t used to the honeytrap. And that Josiah made the move he made, when he did, because he suddenly realised that Stephen wasn’t just laughing along with Kim. He realised his brother had fallen for her, and that wasn’t part of the plan.”

O’Connor winced, “Three brothers. What in the hell could they be conspiring to do?”

“The Chief Financial Officer. The Head of Research and Development. A specialist contractor who designs weapons.” Suzie corrected him, “There is something off-books at McIntyre industries. A design that Ted created, that Josiah was developing, and that Stephen was funding. A design that somehow required outside help, specifically, my help. Kidnapping me was just industrial espionage. That’s it. That’s all they wanted. The timetable is what has made them dangerous. That and whatever friends Stephen was being paid by to make sure it happened.”

O’Connor sighed and shook his head, “This is a good lead, Suzie, but it isn’t enough to act on. Stephen isn’t able to talk to us. Josiah is saying all the right things. Ted is missing. And you... You are supposed to be talking to a psych. Getting your head on right. You’ve never killed before.”

She stood up, “I like you, boss. I really do. I try and follow your rules, and I do appreciate the leeway you give me. But I am not going to

be okay. Not until this is over, and I know that Kim is safe. That's not going to happen. And when I'm upset, I act out. I'd rather you point me in a direction, than letting me blow up on the spot. Let me be dangerous to the right kinds of people."

"I could just arrest you." He shrugged.

Suzie grinned at him, "And how long would you be able to hold me for? If I got really panicked?"

"I'm hearing you." He nodded, "But I'm also hearing alarm bells. You were a target, Suzie. You're just a kid. All you've ever done is basic. You never went overseas, never did a tour where you were taught how to live with the guilt of killing another living person. It isn't something you ever get over. Never. It stays with you."

"I know!" She yelled at him, and then winced, looking annoyed with herself for the outburst. "I know. I remember everything, always. You think I'm not seeing their faces? Hearing their voices? Seeing the little details. Knowing the ones who had families. The ones who were seduced into this with cult-like brainwashing. I know it all. I know I'm never going to get over it. I'm not saying that I'm okay, O'Connor. I'm saying that right now... I'm dangerous. I need a target. I need an order. Without it... Someone else is going to get hurt. I don't want it to be anyone I care about."

He'd heard disturbingly similar phrases come out of rookie soldiers before. Begging him to give them an order, so that they didn't have to think about what they'd done just to stay alive. They just wanted a target.

If he had even a shred of concern for Suzie's well being, he had to order her to stand down.

Yet, there was potentially a weapon of mass destruction standing by, almost ready to fire. Those were the stakes that Josiah was trying to sell them on.

O'Connor felt like he was ordering her to kill herself, and in a way... He was. "Find me, Ted."

"Yessir." Suzie said grimly, and turned back to her circle of paper.

He ducked out of the tent, so that she had less of a chance on picking up on his inner conflict. He was entirely unsurprised to see Jack Bush standing there, another stack of files in his hands.

The agent looked at him, "You know this is against protocol."

"Stakes are what they are, Wild."

The man shook his head, "You are a cold son of a bitch, O'Connor. She's not coming out of this in one piece."

"No." O'Connor agreed, "But neither is anyone else."

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Suzie Drakes

She looked across the timeline she had created on the floor, and felt a sickening twist in her gut. There was no part of this that she wanted to discuss with Kim, but that was a conversation that she wouldn't be able to avoid.

She resented Josiah for putting her in this position, him more than the other two. It was clear as day that this scheme was his. It was overly complicated, but clever, and it had good intentions behind it.

At some point Josiah had changed his opinion from global disarmament, a pipedream, to taking care of the actual people on the ground in the warzones. He probably saw himself as a philanthropist, and to a certain extent Suzie did agree with him. He was looking to make the world... Better.

He'd lost himself along the way, been consumed by the idea he had, and the conviction that he was right. He was what she could have been if O'Connor hadn't found her, and what she risked becoming every single day of her life. It was the poison of being unable to relate to everyone.

Just because you were faster did not make you better. It didn't mean that everyone else in the world was as slow as they seemed. It didn't make them stupid. A difference of perspective wasn't enough to claim grandeur. That was the realm of mental illness, not of fact or glory.



For the brilliant idiot, his journey seemed to have started around five years ago, when someone tried, and failed, to deploy an Atlas satellite. The thing had never managed to get into orbit, and turned into slightly radioactive waste that had crashed into a village, and killed a number of them. Red Eagle Securities had been hired to go in and clean it up, to deny the event had transpired at all.

Somehow, Josiah had found out about it, and taken that particular crew under his wing and into protective custody. From that point on, he was focused on making sure that nothing he ever made could be used in the same way again. He tried to reimagine warfare without the people. Drones and robotics. It wasn't enough, however.

What the inventor craved had been peace. A world where killing people was a last resort, where the human cost would always be weighed above the economics. A world that simply didn't exist. Josiah had run from his guilt, desperately trying to undo what he had done by creating so many devastating weapons.

He had latched onto two ideas, as far as she could tell.

Firstly, that the resource that the world lacked so desperately that it made war inevitable, time and time again, was power. Without a huge leap forward that would make power both available, and cheap, then proxy wars over materials like lithium would continue to happen, and devastate the world.

Secondly, that the militaries of the world were far more vulnerable than they realised. That Josiah somehow believed he might be able to intimidate them into laying down their arms. Just like he had believed he could fool her into thinking he was losing to her skill, when he had been manipulating the chess board all along.

He was inspired by the horror following the first uses of the atomic bomb, and how so many people had felt that it was a weapon that should never be used again. His arrogance led him to believe he could find a way to avoid the Cold War that followed, and how nuclear weaponry was still a threat to global peace to this day. He believed he could make a weapon that no one else would ever be able to duplicate.

The most disturbing part of seeing the five year timeline of events was how many people had to be involved. How many hundreds had to

know pieces of the plan, and had agreed to it not just willingly, but whole-heartedly. They had faith in him, a blind sort of faith that had led them to placing the entire world at risk.

Senator Davian was the tip of the iceberg. He was one of a group of people funnelling cash through various international contacts and into McIntyre Industries, where it was burned to do the research and development work of hundreds of off-book projects. An international cabal of like-minded people who thought they were bringing in world peace, rather than the crueller truth that they were about to get a lot of people killed.

"This looks... Organised." O'Connor re-entered his own command tent, "You got something for me, Suzie?"

"I hope I'm wrong." She whispered, and took a deep breath, "I... I need to talk to him. Before I know I'm right. I'm not saying a thing. Not before I am certain that... It's... This."

O'Connor crouched beside her, "Come on. You need to give me more than that, girl. He just had you kidnapped. I can't stick you in a room with him. Not without breaking an absolute shitload of rules and protocols. Give me something."

"If I am right, and this was the plan... Then it won't matter how much warning we give to the military, they'll be blindsided. And not just ours. It'll spark off the tensions on the Chinese and Indian border. It'll make Russia lash out at the Eastern states. Everywhere that's balanced on a knife edge will explode." Suzie shook her head, "I'm sorry. I'm not going to toss out a conspiracy theory until I know it's happening."

O'Connor stood up, and shrugged, "Okay. You want me to trust you. I can do that. But what's it's done, you're going to have to trust me. I'm on your side. I will always have you back, Suzie."

"I know." She replied as she uncrossed her stiff legs, and rose up uncertainly. She stumbled as the blood rushed down to her tingling toes, and she rubbed her numb thighs. "You're always there for me."

"Aha."

She considered her frantic escape and what he was saying and shrugged, "They took my arm. I panicked. I'm sorry."

"You never say what you don't mean." O'Connor acknowledged, and waved a hand, "Follow me."

The building where he was being kept was surrounded by a large group of soldiers. She could also see several snipers trained on it, and recruits supposedly training nearby, but patrolling all paths towards the building. O'Connor wasn't taking any chances.

Suzie acknowledged the bars on the two windows, and the slim furnishings, as she entered. Push comes to shove, if Josiah had military training he might be able to escape the building, but getting further than that was as unlikely to be impossible. It'd take something like a gunship to change the status quo.

She sat down across from him, and O'Connor left the room, leaving them alone.

Josiah looked at her tiredly, wiping drool from his face with his shoulder as he sat up slowly. He blinked in surprise, "Well, I look a mess. Not exactly the way I was hoping to talk to you next. At least one of us would be showered."

"Stephen's going to make it." Suzie ignored his pathetic attempt at flirtation, "But he wasn't going to tell her. He wouldn't have done that to Kim. Wouldn't have even known where to begin."

Josiah blinked slowly, "Why... Are you here, Suzie? If you're looking for an apology... I don't do that. Not at the best of times. And you have me at my worst."

"I know. It makes it harder, actually. I like that about you, the way that you prefer to make your apologies by becoming better. By taking action, instead of spitting useless words." Suzie said slowly, wondering how she was going to ask him what she needed to know.

Even if she was right, this was still a chess game. Neither of them was quite ready to knock over their queen, even if they were running out of pieces to sacrifice. "Do you think Ted will be able to finish the generator? That he had enough time looking at the way I keep my arm all fired up?"

Josiah considered her carefully, "Don't do this. Don't try and wheedle some greater truth out of me, Suzie. I've told your boss everything, already. Multiple times. This is about Atlas."

“Specifically, the accident, and the ensuing coverup.” She doubled-down, “Civilians, burned and coughing, reeling from an accident that should never have allowed to happen, killed for the inconvenience of witnessing an experimental weapon that wasn’t ready for deployment. It de-orbited almost immediately.”

He laughed softly, “Doing your homework. I couldn’t get anyone to admit it even happened. How did you?”

“I knew what I was looking for. Every asteroid and meteorite and piece of space junk is tracked. Not just by the various government agencies. You can’t erase a burning streak in the night sky. There’s no delete button for that.” She smiled at him sadly, “Is that when you decided you had to do it? Change the game?”

“It’s when I decided that I needed to control the chess board. The only way to stop the two sides killing each other was to control the centre.” Josiah said firmly, “And I have. Still am. You can’t stop this, Suzie.”

“Don’t make me be the one to have to stop you, Josiah.” She said vehemently, “Because I can. I don’t want to. Despite everything... I don’t hate you. I understand you. I understand that desperate need to make the world a better place. I understand why you built the weapon. A weapon to end all weapons, an arrogant assumption. The war to end all wars begot another within a generation. You’re not the smartest man in the world, Josiah. Don’t be the smartest man left on the cinder.”

He considered her in surprise, “And what weapon would that be? You were take to work on repairing Atlas.”

“No, I wasn’t. I was taken so that Ted could use the nerve conduction circuits from my arm to complete his EMP-proof electromechanical computer. One of several intended to be deployed around the world, and offered as a way forward, once you fuck over the entire technological world for a few minutes. That’s the stability you’re going to try and give them, once you snatch peace away.” Suzie glared at him, “Don’t treat me as stupid, Josiah. Don’t ever do that, again.”

He leaned back weakly, his hands yanking painfully on the handcuffs and preventing him from slouching in the seat. “No... You’re not stupid. I’ve never considered you to be stupid, Suzie, just short sighted. But if

this world is to survive, then we have to start over. We can't start from scratch... But we can do a soft reboot. A few minutes of darkness is all it would take."

"A sharpened stick is all it would take for us to go back to what we were. You're going to make people afraid, and fearful people are stupid." Suzie shook her head, "Take out our aircraft carriers. Knock out our satellites. Take the Internet offline. Knock out the entire global infrastructure built up over the last few decades. It won't do what you're hoping. No one will sit around and think. They'll act first. Attack first."

Josiah stared at her, "Are you... Trying to convince me? I thought you came here to prove that you were right."

"Did I stop and demand that you admit that you cheated in our chess game?" Suzie asked earnestly, "You might feel the need to prove that you're right, Josiah. I don't care if I'm right or wrong. I care that the people close to me are safe. That's it. That is all that motivates me. I don't give a damn about a better world, either. That's why you could never convince me. I lost... Everything."

She paused and smiled sadly, "I dragged myself from that car. After the accident, I dragged myself out into the snow. That's how I lost my arm. Ripped it off in the door it was jammed in."

"I know." He whispered quietly.

Suzie smiled sadly, remembering it in full detail, "But I didn't do it to save myself. Broken spine, shattered and trapped arm. What would be the point of saving myself?"

She could see Josiah shifting in her peripheral vision, "You didn't?"

"No. It isn't something I've really talked about with many people. Kim. O'Connor. Nobody else... I climbed out from that car... Because I saw my brother. He was lying face down in a diesel leak from the truck that hit us. His skin was burning. I climbed over there, thinking I was going to die and bleed out, just so that I could drag him free. Save my little brother." She looked up at him, glaring through the tears running down her face.

Josiah stared at her in horror, "Don't."

“He was already dead. There was nothing I could do.” Suzie stated firmly, “Killed on impact. He never stood a chance. I held my dead brother, waiting to join him. But there was never anything that I could do. Because in this world... Even people like you and I are powerless, sometimes. You can’t fight human nature, and you can’t fight the entire world. If you try... You’ll lose. You’ve already lost one brother. Don’t lose the other.”

Josiah flinched, and she saw it in him. The cracks through his calm demeanour. She saw the horror at his own actions. She saw the guilt in him that would never disappear. He had shot his own brother. It didn’t matter if he felt justified or not, it wasn’t enough to cover up that shame.

The man sat across from her, hesitating, and then he knocked over his queen. “Ted’s gone to the bunker. Where we built the trigger device. He’ll be making the final changes to trigger the rolling blackout. You can’t stop him. I can’t stop him. If they send anyone in, he’ll use it. It might only hit a third of the world, but it’ll be chaos.”

“Tell me where, and I’ll drag his stupid ass back here.” Suzie made a sincere promise.

Josiah nodded weakly, “You win.”

“I know.” She said with disappointment, wishing she hadn’t known it, and that he hadn’t said it.

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Kim Nolan

She looked around fearfully at the sprinting soldiers, and tried to grab someone to, “What’s going on?”

No one answered her, too busy and disciplined to pay attention to the frightened little girl. Suzie hadn’t come back to her, despite the promise. Now, they were preparing to move Stephen somewhere else, and it didn’t look like she’d be allowed to follow.

“Kim.”

She glanced over and saw O'Connor motioning her outside. She walked over to the mysterious figure she'd half wanted to tell Suzie to bed. He wasn't half as attractive now as he had been then. She could see his age, and the weight that made him even older. "What the hell is going on?"

"I can't tell you, not everything." O'Connor sighed heavily, "Look, I know Suzie would want to tell you in person, but she's done enough. Right now she's talking with Josiah."

"You let her talk to that son of a bitch!?" Kim seethed angrily.

He nodded slowly, and she saw the guilt there, "Yeah. I did. And now I am going to have a conversation with you. Suzie left you here, earlier. She had an idea, a breakthrough."

"She does that." Kim winced, "So why won't you let her tell me? Is it some state secret?"

"It is, but you deserve to know anyway." O'Connor took a deep breath, "Stephen is going to be charged with terrorism. He's going to be tried in a secret court, and in all likelihood, you'll never see him again."

Her stomach flipped and she punched the man before she knew what she was doing. He caught her fist instinctively, and she saw the sadness in his eyes. She dropped her hands, "What are you talking about?"

"He loved you, and that's why he was shot. Because Josiah figured that he would give away the plan to you. They weren't terrible people. Just terribly misguided. Stephen helped to organise your kidnapping. He arranged for the two of you to meet in the first place. He was just going to use you to get to Suzie, but you were too much for him. He fell for you." O'Connor was speaking barely above a whisper.

Kim clenched her fists, "No! No! He wasn't just using me! This wasn't... It... You're wrong! Suzie gets things wrong! Wait for him to wake up. He'll prove it. He wasn't in on this."

"It's too late, Kim." O'Connor shook his head, "I shouldn't be telling you any of this. And you'll be facing a hellstorm if you tell anyone but Suzie. But this is the truth. It's done. He was working with his brothers, trying to make a better world. By hurting the rest of us."

She found the ground hitting her, staring in shock at her collapsed legs, and looked up at the impressive agent, desperately searching his face for a single sign of doubt. Some scrap that she could hold on to, a piece of hope.

She found none.

There was no comfort there.

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John O'Connor

Combat boots shifted quietly in the dark, spreading out and moving through the facility with rapid precision. He issued signals to the men behind him, leading them through an underground labyrinth towards a young and frightened man who could launch a weapon of devastating consequence.

He'd had to make a call when he'd learned what was to happen.

He had to make another choice between one life, and so many others. So this time he would not let that choice be one that he didn't have to face. If he was going to sentence Ted McIntyre to death, then he was going to make sure he was holding the trigger.

The counter-terrorism unit's orders for this mission were simple. Get in undetected, and execute the target with extreme prejudice. That couldn't afford the chance that he might trigger the weapon.

Silenced weapons weren't as quiet as television made out. Silent death was up close and personal. The knife in his hand moved quickly as he ended another guard, the body caught by the person behind him, and lowered gently as the unit continued through the facility.

Suzie had to have known the choice he would make. She had promised Josiah that she would bring Ted back alive. She had also known that he would never let her join an active team. That O'Connor would be forced to make the decision to kill Ted before he had a chance to act.

She had sacrificed the last of her values to keep the world safe, because that was what a specialist had to do. Because it was the right thing to



do. Jack had been right when he said that Suzie wasn't going to come out of this intact.

O'Connor lined up the shot.



## 7 Stairway of Descent

Suzie Drakes

She sat on the edge of her bed as she heard a door slam downstairs. She counted down the seconds it would take, and smiled ruefully as she heard her mother screech, “Susan Ashley Drakes!”

She counted down the time it would take for her to ascend the stairs, and rip open the door. “Susan! You will answer me when I -”

The woman cut off when she finally realised what she was seeing, and walked over slowly, “Oh no. Oh, no, honey. Not again. Oh, I’m not losing you again.”

Suzie smiled weakly, and a tear fell down her cheek. Her mother sat beside her, and dragged her into a hug. They might not get along, they might hate each other at times, but they were family. They were all the family that they had.

“Ssh. Let mother make it right.” The woman offered an impossibility, holding her tightly as she cried silently, knowing that things would never be alright. Never again.

It didn’t matter what platitudes the world offered her. The techniques for coping were just that. They taught you to accept that bad shit happens, they didn’t teach you how to fix what had happened. You can’t change the past.

There’s no bringing back the dead, no undoing sins.

She curled up her legs, lying down in her mother’s lap and wishing that she could go back to the world she had known before the car accident had taught her naive self about the unfairness of the universe.

Before she learned you can’t bargain with the sky, can’t exchange one soul for another. It didn’t matter how much you wished that you had died and another had lived. Fact was, you lived. They died. The end.

This time... Everyone else died.

She lived.

The end.

— — —

Kim Nolan

She stood in her apartment, looking around it in wonder as she dropped her bag by the door. It was exactly as she left it. Somewhat messy, but mostly just lived in.

On her desk were printouts and layouts from the project she'd been working on, right before the weekend. There was an empty pizza box shoved into the trash in her kitchen.

A vase of dead flowers was the only sign of any passage of time at all.

Kim yelled, throwing the vase against a wall, shattering it in a spray of glass and water as the dead stems fell to the floor, landing gently amongst the chaos as she clenched her fists and bellowed out her frustration and hatred.

What the fuck was the point of it all!?

She'd lost her boyfriend, she'd lost her friend. She'd nearly died, and had the idea of safety stolen from her. She wasn't safe here, she wasn't safe on a bloody military base.

All for... What?

For a handful of people to end up in graves or prison.

She collapsed crying to the floor, punching the ground repeatedly.

— — —

John O'Connor

"Suppose you'll be moving on, soon." O'Connor said to the agent on his left, who was taking a long drag of a cigarette.

The two stood on a balcony of the office, looking at the twinkling lights of the city. Jack shrugged noncommittally. His cover was blown, but Section Eight might still find him convenient in his current position.

Even O'Connor had to admit he had been useful, but he was still a liability. He acted outside of the chain of command that was supposed to be in place.

"You ever get sick of it all, John?"

He leaned on the railing, and smiled grimly, "This is what I do, Jack. I do it because I'm good at it. I know how to get the best out of people."

Jack looked sideways at him, "You didn't answer my question."

"No. I didn't." O'Connor agreed.

The agent looked up at the stars, "I do. Sick and tired of seeing the broken lives I leave in my wake. I know we do good. Keep people alive. Keep them safe from all the attacks they never know came close. But... Suzie was a good kid. Didn't deserve to end up a ghost."

"She made the right choice in the end. She left."

Jack took a puff, "Not soon enough. Not before we fucked her. We took all her potential, and channelled it, without regard for what it would do to her. You might be able to be okay with that... Not sure I am. Not sure how much longer I can do this job."

O'Connor smiled grimly, "Then stop. If you've got any doubts, then you shouldn't be doing it. We can't afford to hesitate. We do, people die."

"How much longer do you think you can do this? Take people, chew them up, and spit them out?" Jack asked him honestly.

"I do what is necessary, Jack."

The man shook his head, "I'm not asking for Section Eight, John. I'm asking for me. Seriously. How much longer until you break?"

He shrugged, feeling the cold wind whipping at them, "I do what is necessary. I don't see myself here until retirement, but I don't know what tomorrow holds. I do know I'll fight whatever threat it holds. One way or another. I'm good at what I do."

Jack nodded and ground out his cigarette, "Maybe you're right. Maybe this is the end of the line for me. We'll see. Stay safe, John."

"Wild." He acknowledged as the other man left.

He took a moment to savour the cold, and then headed back into the office, stopping by his secretary. "What's next?"



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